MY YOUTH ROMANTIC COMEDY IS WRONG, I EXPECTED

Wataru Watari

Illustration Ponkan8

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13

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Illustration Ponkan⑧

Contents

Interlude

1 **Shizuka Hiratsuka** feels keenly nostalgic about the past.

2 There's something **Iroha Isshiki** wants to make sure of, no matter what.

Interlude

3 **Yui Yuigahama** continues to stand back and watch, to the end.

Interlude

4 Once again, **Hachiman Hikigaya** makes a speech.

5 At some point unknown, the **ending credits** begin to roll.

Interlude

6 Privately, **Hayato Hayama** feels regret.

Interlude

7 What **Hina Ebina** sees through the lens is...

Interlude

8 While **wishing** to not go wrong again, at least...

Interlude

Translation Notes

Yukino and Yui

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Wataru Watari
Illustration Ponkan⑧

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MY YOUTH ROMANTIC COMEDY IS WRONG, AS I EXPECTED
Vol. 13
WATARU WATARI
Illustration by Ponkan⑧

Translation by Jennifer Ward
Cover art by Ponkan⑧

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Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Cast of Characters

Interlude

1: **Shizuka Hiratsuka** feels keenly nostalgic about the past.

2: There's something **Iroha Isshiki** wants to make sure of, no matter what.

Interlude

3: **Yui Yuigahama** continues to stand back and watch, to the end.

Interlude

4: Once again, **Hachiman Hikigaya** makes a speech.

5: At some point unknown, the **ending credits** begin to roll.

Interlude

6: Privately, **Hayato Hayama** feels regret.

Interlude

7: What **Hina Ebina** sees through the lens is…

Interlude

8: While **wishing** to not go wrong again, at least…

Interlude

Translation Notes

Yen Newsletter

MY YOUTH ROMANTIC COMEDY IS WRONG, AS I EXPECTED

thirteen

Cast of Characters

Hachiman Hikigaya..... The main character. High school second-year. Twisted personality.

Yukino Yukinoshita..... Captain of the Service Club. Perfectionist.

Yui Yuigahama..... Hachiman's classmate. Tends to worry about what other people think.

Saika Totsuka..... In tennis club. Very cute. A boy, though.

Saki Kawasaki..... Hachiman's classmate. Sort of a delinquent type.

Hayato Hayama..... Hachiman's classmate. Popular. In the soccer club.

Yumiko Miura..... Hachiman's classmate. Reigns over the girls in class as queen bee.

Hina Ebina..... Hachiman's classmate. Part of Miura's clique, but a slash fangirl.

Iroha Isshiki..... Manager of the soccer club. First-year student who was elected student council president.

Yoshiteru Zaimokuza..... Nerd. Dreams of becoming a light-novel author.

Kaori Orimoto..... Went to Hachiman's middle school. Student at Kaihin Makuhari High School.

Shizuka Hiratsuka..... Japanese teacher. Guidance counselor.

Haruno Yukinoshita..... Yukino's older sister. In university.

Komachi Hikigaya..... Hachiman's little sister. In her third year in middle school.

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Interlude…

Over and over.

Over and over, I look back.

As the distance grows and time passes and the point of no return only recedes behind me, I turn back to wonder what would have been right—I want to tell myself this was the only answer, even though I know that's wrong.

Over and over.

Over and over, I look back.

In the growing light of dawn.

In the afternoon, when the grass is shining with droplets.

In the twilight, when the fine snow is scattering.

In the deep of night, when the hazy moon is wavering.

I've had plenty of opportunities to find the answer, and each time, I've attempted to derive the optimal solution. I always told myself that *this* had to be the best one—most likely. Probably. It had to be.

My decisions have been vague and gray—not terribly wrong, but not quite right, either. Never too close and never too far and never enough to hurt. Whether they're right and true remains uncertain.

It wasn't that I couldn't say what I wanted to say—I didn't even *know* what I wanted to say. And in that case, did I have the right to say anything?

That's why, at least—

—I just wanted to be right this time. I didn't want to let any mistakes or errors slip by.

I couldn't afford to go wrong anymore.

1

Shizuka Hiratsuka feels keenly nostalgic about the past.

Over and over—over and over I look back. But I don't stop my feet from moving. Heart pounding, I don't try to catch my breath or wipe off my dripping sweat.

I couldn't, or I'd use some single trivial gesture like this as an excuse to stop. But my eyes refused to give up on what was behind me. I hated them for it.

The single teardrop on her face when we'd parted ways wouldn't leave my head.

The marks from the rain that morning still lay on the asphalt, reminding me of the streaks of tears running down her cheeks. My legs were moving in an unnatural and clumsy manner, and my feet failed to kick up the puddles. With every step, I just about turned back again.

But even if I did go back, what could I do then? What should I say?

No, I knew an ideal answer, or something like it, existed inside me. But I couldn't choose, enact, or validate it. It would be the standard societal answer, but it didn't seem like my answer—like our answer.

The sun gradually lowered in altitude, reddening by degrees.

The shadows of the rows of houses, apartment complexes, and shopping centers stretched long, and eventually, they would merge with the coming darkness as the sun sank into the west. I ran on, desperate to avoid being swallowed.

The contact of my feet on the ground was certain and clear, unlike the thoughts that spun around and around in my head.

I thought about what that single falling drop had meant, then ran that thought into the ground, coming up with reason after reason without reaching any real answers. And I left it that way.

Just like I'd always done.

If I continued straight ahead, I'd eventually reach the ocean.

The bitter oncoming wind was sneaking into the cracks between my coat and scarf. The air stabbed at my flushed cheeks, stinging them and making them stiff. I was still chilly, but sweat was beading on my forehead. Even after I peeled off the scarf wrapped around my neck, something inside me still felt strangled.

Panting raggedly, I blew out the thing caught in my chest.

Despite all my impatience and anxiety, it was as if I was literally being pulled from behind, and by the time I'd passed two bus stops, my legs had begun to slow. When a lucky red light finally forced my run to end, I dropped my hands to my knees and let out a deep breath.

After all that effort, everything caught up with me the moment I stopped.

The meaning of her tear, the worth of her words, and a deluge of questions about both.

I was certain I'd made another mistake.

Ahead of me was an old walk signal that looked like they'd forgotten to replace it. The dark, muddy red—the color of diseased blood—went out.

I had to run again.

With a forceful exhalation somewhere between a moan and a pant, I raised myself up and took a step forward.

The signal telling me to move onward was a dark, somber green.

X X X

Sounds reached me from distant clubs—shouts, the ringing of metallic bats, the bass notes of a euphonium, the brakes from a rusty bicycle, sheet-iron roofs rattling in the wind.

These were the after-school sounds.

But the closest sound was my own panting. I swallowed it, strangling my breath until it was quiet.

When I went into the school building, all the outside clamor faded away, and it was like stepping into another world. The still, cold air wavered, like a membrane that sucked in all the sounds of a living, breathing school.

At some point, they'd started installing fluorescent lights only on alternating sides of the hallway, making it a little darker when

dusk approached. Each step forward brought with it a heavier weight on my heart. Or maybe I was just calming down.

Now that my head had cooled, I could hear the words she'd said so sadly again.

After that phone call, I'd raced all the way here, and my thoughts had been whirling around the entire time, too.

The things that had been put into words, and the things that had not.

The things that should have been given clear form remained vague, but even without giving them form, I clearly understood what was in that unopened box anyway.

With so much unsaid, I couldn't know if my words on the matter were worth anything. But I'm sure the reason Miss Hiratsuka expressly bothered to make me use those words was because this is the end.

Bit by bit by bit, the inevitable separation inched closer as I gazed up at the reddening twilight sky from the window.

I didn't pass by anyone in the hallway that led to the teachers' room. It was utterly silent.

I'd already caught my breath, and all I could hear was my own footsteps and heartbeat. They should have been ticking at around the same tempo, but one was slowing as I approached the door, while the other raced.

I peeled off my coat and balled it up in my arms along with the scarf I'd been carrying. Once I was standing in front of the door and reaching out to knock, my hand suddenly dropped.

I was losing my nerve, wasn't I? I sighed at myself.

But I couldn't be standing here pathetically forever.

She would—

Miss Hiratsuka would leave me eventually. I hadn't known, so I'd still failed to show her anything in the end.

But the one thing I had understood was that I couldn't let her see the worst of me.

I let out one last big, hesitant sigh. Reaching out again, I knocked loudly, then immediately touched my fingers to the handle.

The end of the school year was always a busy time, and there were a number of teachers briskly rushing around the staff room. Meanwhile, my gaze drifted entirely on its own to just one point. The place where I always looked first whenever I came here.

And there was Miss Hiratsuka.

Her back was turned to the entrance, and she must have been dealing with some paperwork. She appeared almost graceful—her spine straight, her long black hair occasionally swaying, and her narrow shoulders rotating in a stretch.

I wasn't really used to seeing her working seriously, so maybe that was why I never got sick of the sight. I felt bad about bothering her again, and I almost couldn't bring myself to disturb her. No, that's kind of a lie. Actually, mostly a lie.

It was just that I was reluctant to bring this time—the time in which she'd been unchanging—to an end. So I didn't call out to her. Only now was I realizing that losing someone meant losing these scenes you'd taken for granted, too.

And so I moved along one sneaky, soundless step at a time, hoping to watch her for just a little longer, as I wondered how I would usually address her.

But before I could open my mouth, she said to me, "Sorry, can you wait a bit?" Even without looking over her shoulder, she could tell I was coming and pointed to the back of the teachers' room where we always talked.

Miss Hiratsuka spoke calmly, no different from usual. This was how she was supposed to behave around me, with the distance of a teacher to a student and the boundary line between adult and child.

So I replied with just one word. "Right."

"Mm-hm," Miss Hiratsuka replied, gaze still on her work. And with that, our very brief and meaningless exchange was done.

I didn't say anything else and walked ahead to the partitioned-off area and its faint, lingering smell of cigarettes. I placed my balled-up coat and scarf to the side and sat down right in the middle of the leather sofa, just as I had some time before. The aged springs creaked.

That smell, that sound, brushed up against a memory.

It was right before I'd brought up the subject of the prom, when I came to get the clubroom key that I'd never touched before. I'd spoken with Miss Hiratsuka in this reception space back then, too. Now I had a name for the expression on Miss Hiratsuka's face when she called out to me as I was leaving: desolation. Gentle, but tinged by loneliness. It was the first time I'd seen that emotion from her.

I realized now she must have been about to mention her departure. Or maybe she'd been trying to bring it up, even before.

All of it was finally ringing a bell.

But I hadn't even imagined the possibility then.

I didn't know how many years she'd been teaching here nor any of the particulars about the transfer system in public schools, so it never would have crossed my mind. There was no point in my regretting it now.

I mean, if you included elementary and middle school, I haven't had much personal interaction with teachers during my almost ten years of school. Well, I have had a couple grievances… Wait, no, when I actually think about it, maybe five or six, but now that I'm older, I really don't care about that stuff much anymore. All I hold toward them is the simple thought that I hope they burn… Hmm, maybe I'm more upset about this than I thought.

So this would probably be the first time I'd ever said good-bye to a teacher who had really taught me things.

It just didn't feel quite real, like it was happening to someone else. Well, more like I was making an effort to take an objective bird's-eye view. I was aware this was helping me stay calm about it. And the word *calm* has an abnormally Shizuka Hiratsuka vibe to it. As I was mentally making nonsensical jokes to myself, I let out a chuckle under my breath.

I waited on the sofa without even a twitch.

Because of the partition, I couldn't see what Miss Hiratsuka was doing right then. This divided area was filled with a suffocating tranquility that put me a bit on edge. The sounds of the school staff and the shrill ring of the phone told me that time was moving, albeit slowly. The glimpse of sky beyond the window was darker than it had been earlier.

As the view blurred distantly, I heard a *tunk*.

I looked over to see Miss Hiratsuka rapping on the thin partition wall. "Sorry for the holdup."

"Oh, it's fine…" At her faint, lonely smile, I couldn't even complain that she'd made me wait or shoot back a joke. I'm sure I should have said something tactful, but now wasn't the time for that, either.

Despite the hubbub in the rest of the room, it was like the air around Miss Hiratsuka was frozen solid enough to block off all sounds. The moment she sat down on the sofa opposite me, all I heard was the creak of leather.

"All right, where should we begin…?" she said, but nothing

followed. Instead, she set the usual ultra-sweet canned coffee she was holding on the low table and slid it over toward me.

But I wasn't thirsty, so I gave my head a little shake. She held out the black coffee in her other hand instead. Now I had to take it, so I reached out reluctantly to the familiar label and nodded back at her.

The canned coffee must have been in the refrigerator, as it was cold and wet with condensation against my skin. Warming it in my hands, I patiently waited for Miss Hiratsuka to speak.

But all I got was a rhythmic tapping and no words.

Miss Hiratsuka was lightly tapping the cigarette in her fingers on the table, filter down, maybe gathering her thoughts, or maybe just to pause. I know she was also packing the tobacco, but right then, it felt as if there was something else in the gesture.

Eventually, Miss Hiratsuka lit her cigarette.

Tobacco smoke drifted up from the tip, with the strong scent of tar.

Hardly anyone in my life smokes. So there will come a time when I won't smell this anymore. And then, every time I do, I'll remember this woman—until I eventually forget her.

Those thoughts were swirling around me like the smoke itself, and I waved my hand in an effort to disperse both. "Well, first… should we start with the prom?" That was the reason I'd run back here in the first place. But I found myself implying there was something else I should have been asking.

I'm sure Miss Hiratsuka noticed that, too, but she didn't show it. She just nodded. "Yeah…" She paused there, letting out a short huff of smoke, then crushed the fairly long remainder of her cigarette in the ashtray. When the brightly burning cherry went out, it left a mess of white ash and fresh brown leaves there, smeared in black.

As I stared down at the contents of the ashtray, Miss Hiratsuka let out a weak sigh. "To get to the point—it's under review by the school administration. They're leaning toward canceling it."

"Under review?"

"Mm-hmm. The final judgment is still deferred, but the administration's attitude probably won't change much. Therefore, they're asking those running the event to 'exercise self-restraint,'" she said dispassionately. She was hiding her own feelings well.

The way she was stating it all as immutable fact made me cut in. "Self-restraint? That's just a fancy way of saying it's canceled,

isn't it?"

Miss Hiratsuka lightly scratched her cheek as if she didn't know what to say, staring off in the other direction. "The school…and the parents are both in a delicate position. Since they gave informal permission once already, they really can't just *tell* you it's canceled…so they're gently requesting that you do it yourselves." Then her gaze flicked to me.

“Uh, but before…”

“Mm-hmm,” she replied bitterly, and I realized there wasn’t much point in saying what I’d been about to. Yukinoshita and the others would have already talked about this. I should be asking something else. “You don’t agree with the school’s consensus, do you?”

“I don’t. I think we should have a discussion about continuing it and try to convince them to understand. And I did tell the administration that during the review. But…” She stopped there, but she didn’t need to continue. I could figure out the rest.

When some of the parents and guardians felt uneasy after seeing photos on social media of the pre-prom—a mini-event for testing out the prom and filming the PR video—Yukinoshita’s mother, a trustee of the parents’ association, had come to the school to act as their proxy. That had just been a few days ago.

Mrs. Yukinoshita had pulled up examples for comparison, saying that even in the countries where proms had originated, issues had been reported of drinking and improper sexual conduct. Thus, she had come to inform us of their objections.

Most likely, by this point, the school administration had already made up their minds to cancel it.

“…Well, with someone actually marching right in here, I’m not surprised they said what they did,” I said.

“Yeah. Once it’s out of my purview, I’m just on the bottom. Anything I say is just advice to them. That’s the tragedy of working for the man.” She chuckled at her own expense, and I shrugged and nodded back at her.

She was quite correct. She wasn’t the only one getting ignored in their decision. There were the other students, as well as the graduates and everyone else at the bottom. And now, their conclusion after considering everything was to close the curtains on the matter without causing open conflict, by having the weaker side put away their spears.

Self-restraint truly was a great way to go about it. Honestly.

“Having a job really is the worst,” I said.

“That’s not true at all. It’s a lot of fun, if you climb up to the top. You get to do whatever you want.” We both laughed at the clear irony. What else could we do? Her cynical joke was, in a

sense, right on. At this very moment, we were at the mercy of those above us.

On this issue, Yukinoshita's mother was in control; she had a certain level of power underpinning her authority. That was the kind of person who had strode into this school, and she'd also alluded to a discussion with the higher administration, too. With such a visible performance, no matter what the discussion was about, problems would inevitably surface.

No matter what the truth was, her actions were what everyone saw.

Even if the engagement between Mrs. Yukinoshita and the school administration was simply a "chat" or "visit," if a figure with a certain degree of status went to the trouble of coming in person, that created pressure, and it was very likely the school would "make inferences" and act based on what they believed she wanted.

Even if it was just two VIPs having a trivial chat over tea, the fact that they were talking privately and out of earshot would give rise to suppositions and encourage people to make assumptions about what they wanted.

And honestly, we do things like that on a daily basis—it's why we tell people to "read the room." It's using nebulous information to personally interpret the implicit, and it even takes that to be a virtue.

"Reading the room" and "guessing what a superior wants"—these abilities keep people in line in a peaceful and insular way. Those high-context negotiation skills are vital, especially in communities that are closed in a sense, such as schools, neighborhoods, or workplaces.

Seriously, man, don't you think we have to do this way too much? Like how the guy has to be the one to ask the girl's number or the one to message her on LINE to invite her to hang out, and then he has to generate an aura around the third date that says, like, *You can tell me you like me now*. Like, what the hell? It's like turtling with Guile. If you're playing Zangief, you're shit out of luck, you know? Actually, it's pretty bad even when you're not playing Zangief. Friendships create their own local rules, too. Once people start saying stuff like *He doesn't really vibe with us, huh?* or *He's not a bad guy, but…*, then you start reading ahead into each other's moves like you're Yoshiharu Habu at a shogi tournament, and before you know it, you're getting sorted into the social equivalent of Habus

and Habu-nots. In these games of reading one another, if you lack the Guile to roast the competition, then forget T. Hawk or Eagle or even Birdie—you're just a cooked goose.

Since each individual community has its own local rules, you have to be sure to catch these small signs while also melding in with their vibe. Being someone who has failed to fit in everywhere, from preschool, elementary, middle, and high school to clubs and cram school, I've been crowned with all seven titles in social exclusion. I'll even have another run at it in university, so being an eight-title champ isn't just a dream! It's exactly like shogi.

This is me, with my reputation for reading the atmosphere. Well, leaving aside whether I'm actually successful, I do have a good understanding of how important it is.

Which was why I couldn't argue with the answer the school administration had come up with. It's easy to label this sort of response as bureaucratic, but if it were me, I bet I'd wind up making the same decision. I mean, it's way too much trouble to bother opposing social pressure!

I turned my face toward the ceiling. "…I see," I said, expressing both understanding and disappointment. My tiredness must have shown on my face, as Miss Hiratsuka slid the untouched canned coffee on the table toward me. I bowed my head in thanks at her and accepted it with gratitude.

Scraping at the pull tab with my nails, I gathered my thoughts.

With things as they were right now, it would probably be impossible to reverse the decision made by the school administration.

As long you don't make a problem out of a problem, it won't become a problem. But once it does, the fastest way to deal with it is to expediently cede everything to those in charge.

If someone tells you you're doing something ill-advised or being inappropriate, then the correct choice is to go *Ugh, get off my back, I won't do it again* and make whatever apologies needed for the moment, making it clear self-discipline is all you need as you quietly lie low until the matter is forgotten. Society these days is particularly suffocating, you know, so there's nothing you can do about that. The Treasured Tool called the Staff of Political Correctness is too strong. Maybe soon enough, they'll be saying the term *political correctness* is discriminating against people who failed their civics class, and that word will be politically incorrect, too, I

dunno.

But regardless, the problem here wasn't actually the issues raised or the demands for change. It's common to point out where there's room for improvement, and that act could well enable the reforms that make society easier to live in. Making those considerations, in and of itself, is not at all a bad thing.

The problem is the people who proclaim themselves on the side of righteousness and virtue, the good common people, who refuse to open their mouths.

They always think the same way. Conflict is bad, causing issues is bad, having a critical opinion is dangerous, and they won't examine the background or core of a problem. They'll just sort of keep it at arm's length until finally they all get together to loudly sing the victory song of justice: *It's bad, so we should stop it!* They're both irresponsible and eager to dog-pile you, and even if you apologize, there's no forgiveness.

And I, of course, am the most pure, upright, noble, righteous, and correct person ever to exist since the beginning of time, so of course I won't go anywhere near those things or do anything that could be misconstrued.

Words like *political correctness*, *ill-advised*, or *inappropriate* become causes on their own, and with a loud minority and the silent majority all mixed together, they construct a majority that prefers to maintain the safe status quo.

It's the way of the world that the majority is the strongest. War is numbers. Numbers are strength. Strength is power. Power is dangerous stuff. If you have the power, you can do most things and beat down most opponents. In other words, muscle, which generates power, is the ultimate good, and lifting is the most powerful solution. You get what I mean? Because I sure don't.

What I do get is that right now, the prom was in an extremely precarious situation.

Right now, the only ones who knew were the student council and related parties, some of the parents' association, and the school administration, but if the students and parents learned of the opposition to the prom and the demand for self-restraint, it would help the anti-prom faction gain momentum.

If we just stood by and did nothing, it would be hard to turn it around. But there wasn't anything effective to be done.

"We're shit out of luck here…" A tired chuckle slipped out of

the corners of my lips.

Then, my eyes happened to meet with Miss Hiratsuka's. There was a little heat in her gaze, and she seemed to be patiently waiting for my reaction. She set her elbows on her knees, unlaced her fingers, and slowly said, "You're still trying to make the prom happen, huh."

When she repeated what she'd said to me over the phone, I found I didn't know what to say.

Her manner of speaking was entirely gentle, nothing accusatory about it. But I couldn't answer because I was still unsure whether intervening in the prom was right or wrong. I'd also add that I was kind of embarrassed about running my mouth over the phone. But now that that cat was out of the bag, I couldn't deny it.

And so I gave in to gravity and nodded—although it mostly looked like I was letting my head hang. "I don't know if that's a good thing, though…," I said, turning slightly away. My words were neither black nor white. The term flickering through the back of my mind made them come out weak.

Codependence.

I couldn't help but feel like Haruno Yukinoshita's evaluation had been the most accurate expression of our relationship. Even if I wanted to deny it, I didn't have any evidence to disprove it.

I lowered my gaze as the energy left my voice.

At the foot of the sofa, some lopsided, blackened circles had been rubbed into the flooring. The marks must have been made through use over the course of many years. There was no sign of any attempt to fix them, either. The concrete below was peeking through these rounded scratches.

As I was zoning out, staring at them, in the corner of my eye I saw Miss Hiratsuka fold her long legs the other way. "Indeed. Yukinoshita doesn't want your intervention."

When I looked up again, Miss Hiratsuka's serious gaze met mine.

Yes, Yukino Yukinoshita was rejecting any assistance from me. Miss Hiratsuka had been there and heard the whole speech. So she was saying this now because she'd found out then. Or, considering how she had avoided telling me at first about how the prom was heading toward cancelation, it was possible she'd heard about Yukinoshita's intentions at another point. Maybe Miss Hiratsuka was aware of some information that had been kept from me.

That thought made me hesitate to carelessly step into it, and all I could do was offer a flimsy half smile in return. I wasn't used to moving those muscles. *Oh, so this is a forced smile.*

To be honest, I knew this would inevitably be a huge hassle, and just thinking about the fruitless exchange of words I was about to have with her was so depressing. I knew that it wouldn't lead us to a worthwhile conclusion, but I'd made my decision that I had to do it anyway. That had to be why I went to the trouble of trying to smile at all.

It was a vague and strained attempt. Miss Hiratsuka's gaze softened, and her lips curved up slightly. "…So you're going to do it anyway."

"Well, I'm used to being unwanted," I said.

That's how it's always been. I've always been going too far, and I wasn't going to fix that habit now.

Miss Hiratsuka gave me a blank look, blinking a few times. Then, as if she couldn't resist, she turned her mouth away and smiled. There was something like glee in it.

When I glared back in mild protest, she cleared her throat quietly and schooled her face again. "Ohhh, sorry. Well, I am a little glad." She paused there, her eyebrows turning down in consternation. "It's just that Yukinoshita is struggling to make a change, and I want to support her, too. So I don't know if giving her a hand so casually is the right idea. It might hinder her. Especially when she has so much to worry over." Miss Hiratsuka's gaze, which had been drifting downward, flicked over to capture me. I could tell she wanted to say something, and I could sense in it her consideration for Yukinoshita.

"If it's that stuff about dependence or whatever," I said, "I feel like she's worrying in the wrong direction."

"Mm-hmm… Well, I don't think *dependence* is the right word for it, either, but it's about how she interprets it. When someone is biased, a lot of the time, nothing you can say will get through to them."

"Yeah… Well, you're right…" I knew that kind of stubbornness. To be more precise, I knew what it felt like when someone else saw it in me.

I try and try to convince myself to live through vague, cotton-candy days, but I can't avoid seeing it somewhere along the line. I can't quite fool myself, no matter how many words I expend in the

effort, and I wind up obsessing over it. I'm fastidious to the point of insurmountable self-consciousness. That self-consciousness continues to live in my heart even now. I feel like it's always patiently lurking in the darkness overhead, one step behind me.

That's why I get it. The perception I had of myself can't be wiped away so easily. That would be the same for Yukinoshita, too. Maybe this wasn't truly dependence, but at the very least, she perceived it to be so. I could deny it all I wanted, but it probably wouldn't convince her.

"Besides, what Haruno said isn't necessarily wrong," said Miss Hiratsuka. "It's important to Yukinoshita. It could be like a sort of trial she's laid on herself."

"A trial?" I asked. That wasn't something I heard often.

Miss Hiratsuka gave me a little nod in return. "Mm-hmm. Or perhaps you might call it a rite of passage." She picked up the cigarette on the low table and lit it. Taking a longer drag than the last time, she let out a slow, thin breath of smoke. "You think I'm being dramatic?"

"…No." I gave my head a little shake. "I think…well, it happens."

"Yes. It's pretty common. It could be anything—music or manga, submitting a piece of writing, or a sport. It can also be a moment of punctuation, such as a tournament or audition. Entrance exams or gaining employment, or possibly turning thirty… Well, I suppose it's all the same. There are a number of periods when you face yourself like that." Her tone sounded faraway, as if she were nostalgic for her own past.

"For you, too?"

"Of course." Miss Hiratsuka smiled brightly back at me, then put her cigarette to her lips again. She let out a short breath of smoke and narrowed her eyes. It must have hit her hard. "There were lots of things I wanted to do, things I wanted to become. And plenty I didn't. Each time, I made a choice, faced it, failed, gave up, and chose again, then did it over… I'm still like that."

Her words hung forlorn in the air, like the smoke.

Whatever past she was referring to, I didn't know about it. But even Miss Hiratsuka, who seemed complete, had attempted to prove things many times to get to this point.

So as I said…this stuff happens.

We always seek the foundation, confidence, and

accomplishments to be able to live our lives alone. Nobody will guarantee you anything, and even if they do, you still have to believe in it. That's exactly why you hope to prove yourself, by yourself.

Was it the right choice to barge in and try to help Yukino Yukinoshita with her determination, her decision, her life? That was what Haruno Yukinoshita had asked me before.

Those choices, challenges, failures, and resignation should all belong to her alone. Would others be allowed to intervene? I had no answers. What title, what degree of involvement, would permit someone to touch that?

As I struggled with my indecision, Miss Hiratsuka loudly tapped the ash off her cigarette, then gazed at me through the hanging white smoke. "All of that is why I want to ask—how do you plan to engage with her, from here on out?"

I was sure this would be the last time she would confirm this with me.

So I considered carefully. Whatever I said had to be truly honest.

"…At the very least, I don't think completely staying out of it is an option."

The answer I'd given her over the phone then still hadn't changed.

But I wouldn't say it twice. My decisions and my words aren't that cheap.

I didn't even have to consider the question. I'd already decided. The only thing there was left was the conclusion. Whatever Yukinoshita wanted, it wouldn't change what I would do. What she'd told me before all this was reason enough for me.

That's what I've always done. I only know a few ways to do things, and I can only ever select one method. I've never managed anything else well. The more I try to avoid mistakes, the more complicated and twisted I make them, and it all goes wrong.

That's why this is the one thing I'll do, in the way I can do it.

Miss Hiratsuka leveled a frighteningly serious look at me, and I didn't run. My eyes weren't wide—they were rotten, dull, and muddy, but I would never avert them.

Eventually, the corners of the teacher's lips slowly rose in a little smile. "I see." Her eyes softened.

Her satisfied nod was a little surprising, and I was taken aback.

I'd felt pressured by her before, but now the pure gentleness in her manner made me relax, too, and my mouth got away from me a bit. "*I see*? Wait, that's it?"

"That's enough. I believe in you," she said immediately and without hesitation, without even looking at me.

"…Well, thanks." If she was gonna be so direct, I couldn't even be properly embarrassed about it. I gave a little shake of my head, replying with a flustered thanks under my breath. My cheeks were burning.

She chuckled. "Listen, Hikigaya. Just lending a hand with the prom isn't going to help her. What's important is the *way* you get involved. You get that, right?" she asked, and I nodded.

Miss Hiratsuka was correct—if I just said I was going to help with the prom, she wasn't going to accept that. That was exactly why I had to consider how I'd be involved. Plus, the success of the prom had to guarantee Yukinoshita's independence, her self-reliance.

This was something we had been lectured on countless times by this point, but the way to help someone was not to give them a fish, but to teach them how to fish. Ultimately, Yukinoshita should achieve salvation on her own, but I couldn't think of how to fulfill that condition right now. Just holding the prom was technically doable, but it didn't seem like that was the best answer.

I found myself scratching my head. "This is pretty difficult…"

"Well. I wouldn't call it…easy. Especially with you kids." Miss Hiratsuka blew a puff of smoke around the cigarette in her lips and cracked a little wry smile.

"Yeah. And I feel like this tends to happen when the other person wants help… We're totally at odds with this, so…," I said, making an X with my fingers.

Miss Hiratsuka shrugged in mild exasperation. "Come on now, what are you talking about? What have you all been doing all this time?"

"What have we been doing…?" *I don't remember at all…* I felt like we hadn't been doing much.

As I was racking my brain, Miss Hiratsuka made a fist and thrust it right in front of my face—but then suddenly she was shadowboxing. *Oh no, she's gonna hit me and then she's gonna be all nice afterward and the whiplash will make my heart go pitter-patter and then will this turn into full-fledged domestic violence…?*

While I was internally freaking out, Miss Hiratsuka was grinning boldly. “Since time immemorial, a clash of ideals between two individuals has always been resolved through competition.”

I’d heard that at some point before. “Ohhh… That brings back some memories…”

“Right?” She gave me a lighthearted grin. But her smile lasted only a moment. The corners of her mouth remained raised, but her gaze wandered a bit sadly through the air. “It sure does…,” she added, although not to me. I don’t think she even realized she had spoken. I’m sure she was talking to herself.

I rocked my head a few times. The motion was kind of like a nod, but it wasn’t as if our thoughts were in the same place. So I didn’t respond out loud.

As if to fill up the silence she’d created, Miss Hiratsuka continued. “You’ve disagreed plenty of times. But you’ve always managed to get past that. I think you can have a bit more faith in what you’ve built together,” she with a kind smile, and I listened to her, digesting it.

“Yeah, I guess…”

Yukinoshita didn’t want me to save her, but I couldn’t just not touch this at all. So I had to find a different way to be involved. When I considered this, based on what we’d done until now, I could vaguely see what that involvement might look like.

Miss Hiratsuka smiled in satisfaction once she could tell I had convinced myself. “If you’ve decided on a course of action, then we can get to the point. Yukinoshita should still be in the student council room. So go on.”

“Okay.” I started to get up but then remembered something that had been bothering me, and I sat back down again. “Oh, but one last thing.”

“Hmm?” She cocked her head at me, an innocent gesture that belied her age.

Meanwhile, the corners of my lips pulled up in a smirk in spite of myself. “For the prom, it’s just *self-restraint*, right?”

“…I believe I heard someone saying something very similar recently,” Miss Hiratsuka grumbled.

Then that meant Yukinoshita and the others hadn’t given up on the prom after all. Just like me—in fact, they’d come to that conclusion even faster than I had.

Miss Hiratsuka closed her eyes in a deliberate-looking way and

breathed a sigh. While she was at it, she set her half-smoked cigarette in her lips again, looked off in the other direction, and blew a puff.

I could tell that was a gesture of tacit consent. *Thanks…*, I thought, but I also got a little worried. "Is that okay? If I pull something stupid, you'll be taking the heat, won't you…? Won't that make things uncomfortable for you?"

If there was a problem, then Miss Hiratsuka, being our club's teacher-advisor, was bound to have her responsibility called into question. I didn't know specifically how she would be punished, but I was sure they would needle and gripe at her. Emotional vigilantism in the name of social sanctions is common in any community.

Cigarette in her lips, Miss Hiratsuka fluttered a hand as she winked jokingly at me. "I won't be around by that time anyway. I don't care about what happens after I'm gone."

"Ooh, don't you sound like the kids these days."

"I'm not *like*. I *am* these days. I'm so young, I can't even." Miss Hiratsuka smacked at the table as she protested in a particularly affected parody of a young person. Then she got even sillier and started chopping her neck with the side of her hand. "Well, if something happens, then it'll just be my head flying. It's not something for you to worry about. So do whatever you want."

"Whoa… Now I feel like I can't do anything…" *Could you not casually put your neck on the line? That's actually a hell of a lot of pressure, mach stress on my life span, okay?*

"I'm joking. Don't worry about it. I'll make it work on my end. If I do get fired, then maybe I'll just get married. Not that I have anyone lined up," she said, swishing aside her long hair with a masochistic *na-ha-ha-ha-haaa*.

I can't laugh with you, y'know…

I smiled anyway, though. "You don't need to worry about that."

"Huh? You'll take me?" she replied instantly, expression blank.

Why would I? I'm not gonna take you. You're wasted on me, okay? Argh, hurry up! Hurry, someone, marry this woman! Before I change my mind!

As I was thinking this, Miss Hiratsuka's watery eyes reminded me of an abandoned black lab. She must have felt the futility of the arrangement as well. *Aww man, just like a big dog. So soothing…*

But I shook my head. *I have a cat at home, sorry!* "I do plan to

resolve things as peacefully as possible, okay?" I said, but that wasn't a promise I could truly make. So I wound up adding the caveat, "More or less."

We were at an overwhelming disadvantage in this situation, after all. And on top of that, I couldn't even guarantee Yukinoshita and I could work together.

I was already starting to think, *This is actually impossible, isn't it…?* but I had to force myself to stay positive. *If I don't, then Doraemon can't go back to the future…*

Yes, I was bluffing; yes, I was full of myself; and yes, I was pushing myself, but I forced my lips into a grin.

Miss Hiratsuka gave me a long look in the eyes. "…Sounds like I can count on you," she muttered gently with a soft smile, as if she were watching the lights of a nighttime train departing into the distance. It was really embarrassing for her to say it straight to my face, and I pretended to pull the hair at the back of my head, turning my face slightly away.

Dramatic declarations weren't my usual style.

I had to resolve this somehow, without causing harm to Miss Hiratsuka. I felt like the difficulty level had gotten bumped up a notch.

But I had a ray of hope now.

If I could just handle this well, Miss Hiratsuka might not even have to take any heat, and it shouldn't wind up affecting her career. *Probably. Maybe. I think it'll be okay. Not that I know. Well, I'll brace for it anyway. Whatever will my parents say if they hear my bride is nearly ten years older than me…? Wait, is that what I'm bracing for?*

Anyway, now that it was settled what I should do, there was nothing else for us to talk about. The silence that descended was natural.

After a few seconds of it, I finished the rest of the sweet coffee in my hand, swallowing something bitter along with it, and got to my feet. I balled up the mess of bag, coat, and scarf beside me and left everything else behind.

"Bye, then," I said briefly, and Miss Hiratsuka just nodded back.

"See ya."

With that, our conversation was over. And that was fine, ending it there.

But then as I was moving on, Miss Hiratsuka called out behind me, "Hikigaya."

I didn't turn around, but I couldn't ignore her, either, and I came to a stop.

"…Sorry. For not being able to say it."

I couldn't see her expression, but I could easily imagine her face, sadly tilted down. I think I was doing something similar.

When I started opening my mouth, the faint bitterness of the coffee came back, and the sickly-sweet milk caught in the back of my throat.

I swallowed them, along with a sigh, and cleared my throat instead. "…No, you don't have to apologize." I glanced back over my shoulder, put a proper smile on my lips, and quickly found the words. "There's nothing you can do about it, right? That's just how work goes. I get that sometimes you can't say things before they're announced officially. Besides, it's still not actually been decided that you'll be transferred, right?" I tried to stay as normal as possible, as cheerful as possible, even though I didn't mean a word of it. But Hachiman Hikigaya isn't a constantly cheery type, so it rang hollow anyway.

Miss Hiratsuka's gaze quietly fell. "Well, you're right. I haven't received the official notice yet." Her job being what it was, she couldn't speak about things that hadn't been released through the proper channels. Those were the rules.

What she said was a type of excuse for the both of us, but that rule was clear, certain, and hard.

There was no choice but to accept it and rely on it to make a compromise. There was no malice or goodwill in what was unsaid, just a hard rule being applied. We knew that. Which was why we just smiled and accepted that this was nothing.

"If I'm not transferred now, how embarrassing would that be?" The teacher swept her long hair away with the back of her hand and laughed. "Ha-ha."

"Seriously." I smiled at her, too, and just for an instant, that made my heart feel lighter.

But it was an empty feeling.

I understood it myself.

I could joke about it all I wanted, but I couldn't laugh it off; even my jokes were superficial. I was aware I was just fooling myself with this exchange of words.

But it served as a punctuation mark. Our conversation would end here.

“Well, I’m going,” I said.

“Mm-hmm. Good luck.”

With a casual bow to excuse myself, I started for the door. I heard the sound of a lighter flicking open behind me. There was the *fshht* of the flint and a short inhalation.

Miss Hiratsuka would be staying here to continue her work.

I left the teachers’ room without turning back.

2

There's something **Iroha Isshiki** wants to make sure of, no matter what.

The lingering light of the sunset seeped out through the glass facing the ocean. On the opposite side, the eastern sky had turned an indigo color like a spill of pale ink, the orange streetlamps flicking on to illuminate the students on their way home.

Though the days had gotten somewhat longer, sunset still came early. Soon, it would be late enough for everyone to head home; the calls of the sports clubs coming from the field were already petering out.

I hadn't spent very long in the teachers' room, but it had apparently been long enough for the sights around the school to have changed. In that cramped, partitioned-off space, I hadn't even noticed the clear passage of time.

Everything had transformed in the briefest time I hadn't been looking, and now it was all different.

Even right this moment, traveling the short distance from the teachers' room to the student council room, I could be missing yet another change.

That was why I walked quickly.

There was nobody in the hallway but me; it was filled instead with the setting sun.

The main school building had a lot of windows compared with the special use building and the new building, but the clear glass made me think of cool temperatures even when the sun was shining. All the more so in winter.

My restless footsteps rang out through the frigid, somber air. They weren't light enough to call pattering, not confident enough to call clicking, and not rough enough to call thumping—my footsteps just pat-patted along in an almost moist kind of way. I was rushing, my indoor shoes half-on with their heels crushed, so the rhythm

sounded a little silly.

But it never stopped.

And that was great progress all by itself. It seemed the conversation with Miss Hiratsuka had made my feet lighter, if even just a little.

I had a clear idea of what I should do, what I should think about. I was excluding everything else right now. I'd already come to a clean decision about a number of the issues in my heart. Those were behind me now. And I'd given up the thing that had been caught somewhere in my heart.

I had one last shot, and I would make sure it counted.

If I could just make this happen, I'd leave everything else until later. Now that I'd established my goal, I would explore every avenue. That was what I had to do now.

As I was striding forward, the setting sun pouring into the hallway came to a sharp end. The seemingly eternal rows of glass had been replaced by the wall of the student council room. The door was shut tight, and I couldn't hear anyone breathing within, either. The only breath here was my own. I let out a weak huff and quieted my emotions.

I hadn't seen Yukinoshita or Isshiki for the past few days. The last time we'd met had been the day Yukinoshita's mother had come around to advise that the prom be canceled. The exchange I'd had with Yukinoshita after that had barely counted as a discussion; she'd just vaguely turned me away.

That was why I would try to calmly talk through this. If I got emotional, then I wouldn't be able to fix our disagreements about what was right and what was wrong. *Well, I doubt that'll be a problem. It's okay—my emotions and whatnot are mostly dead anyway. Only the negative ones are still alive, really. Wait, isn't that worse?*

Ohhh, can he do it?! Doki doki… It'll be okay, it'll be okay! You can do it, you can do it! Go♡ Go ♡!

I lowered my mental bar for myself by about five hundred million to encourage myself, efficiently resetting my emotions, then rapped on the door of the student council room.

Then I sensed movement on the other side of the door. "Comiiiing," Isshiki called, her voice accompanied by a patter of footsteps. The door opened right away, and light-colored hair peeked through the crack. A leg appeared, followed by her fluttering skirt, her overlong pink cardigan melting into the sunset.

Iroha Isshiki cutely cocked her head as she leaned through the frame, but the moment she saw me, her expression took a turn that could be summarized in one word: *Crap…*

"…Ahhh." Letting out a little breath, Isshiki shot a look of concern behind her, then came out of the student council room and closed the door behind her. Still uneasy, she peered up at me. "So you showed up after all…"

"Uh-huh. Where's Yukinoshita?" I asked.

Isshiki's head turned just a notch toward the door. It seemed Yukinoshita was inside. A sigh of mixed tension and relief left my nose. I clenched the pocket area of my pants to wipe the sweat off my hands before reaching out to the doorknob.

But then Isshiki scooted sideways to block me. *Is she playing crab here?* So I moved the other way, and she mimicked me. *What is this, man-to-man defense? The Japan National Rugby Team definitely needs you…*

"Hey… You're really in the way… Um, move?" I said.

But Isshiki folded her arms and planted herself firmly in front of the door. "I do actually have to ask what you're here for. No unsolicited visitors." She wagged her finger sternly.

The president's personality being, you know, what it was, I'd been ready to march right on in, but she did have a point. Normally, outsiders weren't allowed in the student council room. When you get to my level, you're treated as an outsider basically everywhere, so I don't know what to do when someone is this up-front with me.

But for someone, you know, how she is, she's sure picked a day to get fussy about things… The way she puts her hand on her hip, wags her finger, and puffs her cheeks is also kind of…you know. And cute…

But in contrast with the cunning cuteness of her gestures, I could tell from her posture as she blockaded the door that she wasn't about to budge. I had to be honest with her, or she wasn't going to let me through.

"…I came to help," I said. Though I waffled on how to say it, I ultimately chose the wording that was the most plain and completely correct.

"…" Isshiki seemed a little surprised, staring at me.

Mm-hmm, got her.

I took advantage of her momentary shock and scooted up to the door. "Then I'm going in."

“Nope. ♡” Isshiki slid sideways once more, blocking me with a bright smile.

“Aww, come on…” *What the heck—is she a gate guard at Edina or what?*

I was starting to worry the stalemate would go on like this, but Isshiki seemed to sense that I wasn’t going to back down, either. Her expression softened considerably. “Um…you went to hear about the situation with the prom, right?”

“Yeah, basically,” I answered.

She touched her fist to her tilted head in a mildly complicated expression. She held the position for a while, then glanced behind herself with concern. Then, she scooched a few steps away from the door, only to beckon me over with small gestures. She had to mean she had something to tell me that she didn’t want Yukinoshita to hear.

Maybe I’ll ignore her and go on in…, I thought, albeit only for the briefest moment before she seemingly read my mind and delicately plucked the sleeve of my uniform to lead me away.

I was incapable of shaking off her small hand, so I obediently followed Isshiki down the hall a ways. We turned a corner, then came to the fourth-floor walkway that connected the main school building to the special-use building.

This walkway had a bench sitting by the wall; during breaks, you’d see some students hanging around it, but there was no one else here at this time of day. The area was filled with a silent, chilly air instead, the sunset streaming in from the west side.

I came to a halt by the bench at the wall, and Isshiki finally released my arm, spinning around to face me. When I rubbed my cuff to fix the wrinkles in my sleeve, the lingering trace of heat was a bit ticklish. *And hey, I’d like you to not suddenly grab my sleeve. It’s, uh, really embarrassing.*

“I’m grateful you want to help, personally, but…” With the window glass at her back, Isshiki hesitated, slightly awkwardly. Her long eyelashes lowered. “But it’s a little hard to let you in now. I mean, hard to let you see each other.”

“Why?” I asked, sitting down on the bench.

Isshiki folded her hands behind her and leaned back against the window. “Honestly, I figured if you came in now, it’d just make things worse. Like, maybe we should give it some time first.”

“Ohhh… Yeah, I guess.” What Isshiki was saying reminded me

that she had been there, too, for that argument the other day. Of course she'd be worried, after watching that waste of time and energy. I was a bit worried about facing Yukinoshita now, myself.

Still, I couldn't back down. "…But if that's what this is about, it'll be okay. I do plan to have a real conversation with her."

"Oh-hooo, verily sooo?"

Something tells me she has some doubts… Her lips were twisted up skeptically, and her eyebrows were locked together. *In fact, she doesn't appear to believe me at all…*

It was so uncomfortable, I had to find something else to look at and cleared my throat. "*Koff, koff*… It's true, okay… I've considered how I should say it."

I knew full well that touching on dependence or whatever would make things worse. I had to avoid that and instead advance the other issues in question. Even if we were technically at odds, since we had the common challenge in making this project happen, we should be able to have a constructive discussion.

Or so I thought. *Hmm, why does Miss Isshiki not seem reassured…?*

"How you should say it…? Whoaaa, not exactly doing wonders for my confidence," she said quite brutally, rolling her eyes.

"Well, that goes without saying." I hadn't led the kind of life thus far that would win the trust of others, I knew. So I just shrugged at her.

Isshiki didn't say anything for a while after that as she examined me closely, but then she let out a weak sigh, dropping her shoulders in a show of acquiescence. Or maybe exasperation. "You're overprotective," she muttered under her breath. Then she stepped closer, pressed down the back of her skirt, and dropped into a seat beside me. Resting her chin on her palm and her elbows on her thighs, she tilted her head slightly upward. Her hair brushed her shoulders, sparkling under the streaming sunset. Her eyes seemed to be looking far beyond the window opposite us.

"I think Yukino's trying to do her best, you know," she said. "Like, it's not like I don't get how she feels…"

"…Well, yeah," I answered, putting my hands behind me, leaning against the wall, and staring at the ceiling.

Isshiki's response was essentially correct. When someone is trying to do something herself, what you want to do is stand back and watch.

“But…will you help, anyway?” she asked. When I turned toward her voice, she was still resting her chin on her hands, but her head was tipped my way. It was a truly manipulative gesture, and adorable, too, but deep in her eyes was enough sincerity to give me chills.

“…That’s the plan.” No one would ever see sincerity in my rotten-fish eyes, but I tried to put a little bit of gravity in my tone, at least.

Isshiki paused as if considering my response. “It is…?” she began, her voice taut and quiet. “Even if that won’t be…what’s best for her?”

“It’s not like I’ve ever been trying to do what’s best for other people… Same story here.”

“Is it…the same…?” she muttered, a little confused, and when I nodded back at her, she looked down. I couldn’t do likewise, so I turned my focus to the window instead.

In the end, it’s always like that.

The things I said to people and the things I did were always nowhere near being correct, just a string of wrongs covered in mistakes. I even screwed up my apologies, forever getting the buttons in the wrong holes. That was all I’d been doing over nearly the past year, while time passed inexorably. Before you knew it, winter was nearly over, and the harsh winds of early spring were rattling the windows.

When the sound shattered our brief moment of tranquility, Isshiki’s face jerked up. “But frankly, I don’t think that’ll convince Yukino.”

“Probably not…” I sighed, and Isshiki leaned forward.

“You know she’s gonna shoot you down.”

“Yeah…”

When I sighed again with extra lamentation, Isshiki pushed even closer. “You’re gonna do it anyway?”

“Yeah…” I answered with a sigh of pain this time, and Isshiki tilted her head, mouth open.

“Huh? Why?”

“What do you mean, ‘why’…?”

Is it that surprising? Oh, silly Iroha-chan, you’ve totally forgotten your manners in this conversation. Well, whatever… But I wonder if our dear Iroha hasn’t forgotten what she said herself, hmm…?

Summoning the full weight of all my indignance, I glared at

Isshiki. “*You* were the one who told me to come help…,” I said.

Isshiki blink-blinked her big eyes at me. Then she jerked backward, hands flailing wildly, and started rambling at top speed. “Ahhh! It was for me?! What the heck, are you trying to seduce me?! So like I don’t mind the special treatment or getting some help when I’m in trouble or whatever but I think it’s way too early for this so please just save it until we’ve figured out the other stuff, sorry.” And then at the end, a polite bob of a bow.

Satisfied by that, I nodded at her. “Yep. You’re way off, but basically.”

“What’s that reaction supposed to mean…? Am I wrong, or aren’t I?” Isshiki huffed sullenly, giving me a dull little glare.

Uh, I mean, this is the right way to react to all that…

Ignoring my weariness, Isshiki touched her index finger to her cheek, suddenly nonchalant and unruffled. “Well, even if it was for me, that’s fine.”

“It’s not fine, I didn’t say that, and that’s not what it was…,” I grumbled, attempting to correct her, but she wasn’t listening.

Finger still on her cheek, she tilted her head with more seriousness this time. “But frankly, I don’t think that will convince Yukino.”

“Yeah… Wait, is this some kind of forever loop? Anyway, can’t you work your wiles on her for me?” I said, putting a little hope into it.

But Isshiki waved a dismissive hand. “What? I *really* don’t wanna do that… I mean, I just can’t. No way.”

“You can’t? And you shot me down instantly, too…”

Wait, didn’t she just say she didn’t want to? Or did I mishear…? I thought, giving her a hard look.

Isshiki cleared her throat, then for some reason puffed out her chest and declared boldly, “I just can’t. A girl won’t change her mind, once she’s made her own decision… Unless it’s something someone else has decided for her, then she’ll easily change her mind. And if it gets inconvenient, she’ll pretend to forget it.”

“Yikes…,” I added in a whisper, turning my face away just slightly. *Isn’t that just you? It’s not because you’re a girl, right?* Weakness is not unique to women, after all.

When I turned back to her again, I saw her eyebrows were in an upside-down V. “…Besides, this is Yukino. I think it’s a bit unlikely.”

“Well, yeah…”

If she wasn’t saying it because Yukinoshita was a girl or whatever, but because it was Yukinoshita, then that did make sense to me. We hadn’t known each other that long, but in the time we’d been acquainted, she’d often displayed a pure, rigid determination. I doubted she’d go back on what she’d said before so easily.

Closing my eyes, I folded my arms and *hmm*’d when Isshiki muttered softly, “She’s really helped me a lot with this, and…I do want to support her.” I flicked a glance at Isshiki to see she was smiling like she didn’t know what else to do. “So I really don’t think I could talk to her for you. Sorry.”

“Ahhh, no, it’s okay. I asked for too much, should’ve thought it through better. Sorry,” I said with a crooked smile to say, *Don’t worry about it*. She gave me the slightest nod in response. Asking for her help had just popped out of my mouth in the course of the conversation, but she’d really considered it. Maybe I should’ve noticed sooner, but Iroha Isshiki was actually fairly quite pretty rather a good person. I felt bad about throwing this at her and dragging her into this mess.

I really had to be thinking about this myself, after all.

…So then how should I start this dialogue with Yukinoshita? I dunno, she’s such a hassle to deal with… Well, so am I. Actually, I’m even more of a hassle than her.

When your thoughts won’t come together, the best thing to do is improve blood flow to your brain. I massaged my scalp; meanwhile, Isshiki just stared at me wordlessly.

“…”

“What?” I asked, noticing her look.

She shook her head. “Oh, just thinking. You’re not giving up, huh?”

“Hm? O-oh, well, I guess.” It was a meaningless answer just to get through the moment. Between her blunt honesty and open staring, I couldn’t manage much more than some flustered noises.

Isshiki came just a fist’s worth of distance closer, still looking right at me. “Why? She’s personally rejected you, and her sister said something to you, too, didn’t she? Why are you going that far? Normally, you wouldn’t put yourself through so much trouble, right?” she said fervently. Even though she said it like a question, she didn’t give me an opening to respond. If she had, I probably wouldn’t have been able to offer her a clear answer.

With each question, Isshiki inched closer, while I slid away on the bench by a roughly equivalent amount in an attempt to escape. But eventually, I ran out of bench.

"There's lots of reasons…" Not knowing what else to do, I finally managed to turn my face away.

Isshiki yanked me by the necktie. "Give me a real answer, please." She forced my head back around until we were eye to eye. She had to have been squeezing my tie pretty hard, as there were wrinkles in it, and her small hand was trembling slightly.

I couldn't turn away or find something else to look at. All I could see were her glossy lips, pressed into a hard line, and her eyes wavering in the glow of the sunset.

She was so close and so earnest, and it took some effort to move my stiff, heavy lips. "There really are lots of reasons… I don't feel like I can explain them right."

But Isshiki wouldn't let me mince words. "That's fine," she snapped. She wouldn't accept anything but an answer.

But probably nothing I said would satisfy her.

Words are hopeless for the feelings and sentiments I have, which is exactly why it's so much trouble to figure out how to describe them. I'm sure it's not the kind of thing we could share, no matter how I tried to communicate it. If I were to try to strictly fit such a nontransparent, undefined, and unclear thing into preexisting words, the whole situation would deteriorate and eventually lead to a big mistake. Most of all, I just don't like writing it all off with a single remark.

I'd always been making excuses, saying this was for work or for my little sister. Yet again, I had to force some reason like that on another person. Saying it was because Isshiki had asked me to do it would be the most straightforward explanation.

But Iroha Isshiki wouldn't want that. She was telling me with her earnest gaze that she didn't mind if I couldn't lay out the logic. She was saying, *Even if you can't say it well, even if it won't come together, that's fine. Just show me your answer*.

That's why I gave a stifled sigh and said it slowly, sincerely, earnestly, with the full acknowledgment that it wasn't the answer she wanted from me. "…I have a responsibility."

"A responsibility, huh?" Isshiki muttered, then swallowed softly. She tilted her head, maybe because I'd been so vague, and then nodded. Her gaze flicked upward, prompting me to continue.

Nodding back at her, I hesitantly responded. I thought I'd knotted my necktie loosely, but it felt like it was really choking me now, and my chest was unusually hot. I blamed Isshiki's grip.

"Even if I'm making things worse, or if there's dependence, that's all… Well, it's my responsibility. I brought it on myself. I know that's what we'll wind up arguing about. So I want to make sure the accounts are balanced. I've always done things this way, so I can't change it now because it's convenient. That's all it is," I somehow finished explaining. It was…sort of a conclusion.

Then Isshiki's hand slid off my necktie to weakly fall. "Ahhh, sorry, that answer was, like, different from what I was expecting, and I kinda zoned out. Sorry for wrinkling your tie."

"Oh, it wasn't in great shape to begin with, so it's fine…," I said, but Isshiki kept muttering things like "No, we can't have that" and "Ahhh" and "Aww nooo" as she hastily rubbed at my tie in an attempt to stretch out the wrinkles. She was yanking on it so much, she was making my head jerk back and forth.

But then her hands suddenly stopped.

"Will you make sure to say what you said just now to Yukino?" Her eyes were down on my tie, so I couldn't see her face. When I failed to respond, she started tugging at it again, as if she was trying to pull the answer right out of me. With each tug, her pale hair bounced, teasing me. It reminded me of a mischievous kitten, and I smiled a little in relief.

"…If you mean just saying it, then, well, basically. Whether she gets it is something else."

"You guys are both so much trouble, seriously." Isshiki lifted her head with an exasperated smile, smacking my chest over the necktie. "Personally, though, having the help of the Service Club would be the least trouble for me. So please do this right." With a *hup*, Isshiki stood and jabbed a finger at me, then chuckled boldly. With a flutter of her skirt, she spun around and started strolling off. After a few steps, she glanced back, beckoning to me.

So does this mean I'm allowed into the student council room now…?

I heaved myself off the bench as well and went after her.

X X X

After I'd followed Isshiki into the student council room, a fragrance hit my nose. It had to be some kind of air freshener. It smelled different from the Service Club room—vibrant, with sweet, fruity notes. No black tea in here.

The student council room wasn't very big, but it had accrued plenty of stuff over the years. It came off as messy. But among the mess, one area was particularly orderly: the president's desk, with its aggressive sense of character, and the plain desk set up beside it. A whiteboard was right behind that, where Yukino Yukinoshita stood.

Given the absence of the other members, it seemed she and Isshiki were hashing out their plan alone. The evidence of that was on the whiteboard. Lines of characters in red, black, and blue were scrawled over the white background.

Yukinoshita was having a staring contest with them, but hearing the noise behind her, she turned around. "Oh, Hikigaya."

"Hey."

Though she noticed my presence, her reaction was quite unaffected, and she even offered a little smile. I assumed she'd heard about what we were being asked to do about the prom, but she didn't appear bothered by it.

"How about we have a break, Isshiki?" Removing the stoppers on the whiteboard, Yukinoshita flipped the board to the back, then rolled it on its casters to the side.

Then she immediately started to make tea. She hit the switch on the student council room's electric kettle, and while the water heated up, she deftly lined up paper cups and got tea bags.

As I was watching her practiced hands with a sort of nostalgia, Yukinoshita noticed me, indicating with her eyes that I should take a seat. She said nothing. Right opposite from her desk, there was a folding chair.

The kettle soon came to a rolling boil that I could hear as I pulled the chair out with a scrape. Isshiki came over to the president's desk as well, drew out a nicer sort of chair with a backrest, and gently leaned back into it.

Eventually, Yukinoshita quietly offered us black tea, poured into cups that were different from the ones we used in the Service Club. I accepted mine with gratitude, an unfamiliar scent rising from the foreign paper cup.

"Have you heard?" Her question was brief and lacking in

specifics, but right here and right now, there was only one thing she and I could be talking about.

"Well, yeah. Since I was with Yuigahama."

Yukinoshita looked at me with mild surprise, but only for an instant, as her face immediately regained its earlier composure. "…I see."

"And I heard the details from Miss Hiratsuka. Are you guys okay? If there's anything I can do, I'll help, but…"

Yukinoshita brought her paper cup primly to her lips to moisten them and answered smoothly, "There's not much need to worry. I've considered my options."

Our exchange was cool, in contrast with the tea in my hands. Isshiki seemed uncomfortable, twisting around. She glanced over at me. Her eyes were saying, *Have a real conversation.*

But hold on a bit here. With conversation, there's flow, context, order, timing, mood, courage, and all sorts of other things. Conversation is way too hard for anyone, isn't it? Even now, I was trying to fumble my way into saying my piece, but she was rejecting me right from the start. First, I had to search for an in, then expand the discussion. I really do suck at this stuff.

Blowing on my paper cup, I considered how to broach the subject. The tea was cooling gradually, bit by bit, so I took my sweet time sipping at it, and once it was at the point where even I could drink it, I muttered, "What do you plan to do?"

Yukinoshita gave me a long look, almost searchingly. "…We're still at the review stage. It's not enough to discuss."

Still under review, huh…? What a thing to say, after writing all that on the whiteboard. Isshiki must have thought the same thing. For an instant, her gaze flicked over to Yukinoshita.

From what I imagined they'd scribbled on the board, they'd already decided on the general direction, and she just didn't want to tell me, so she was dodging the question.

Had she moved the board deliberately to get it out of my sight? Trying to force her to admit as much would be a poor move.

So the standard tactic would be to approach from another angle. It was quite apparent I wouldn't get anywhere just talking with Yukinoshita like this.

Angling my head to Isshiki, I directed the conversation to her instead. "Is there anything I can do?"

Isshiki's gaze went up and to the left, but she answered without

looking at Yukinoshita. "…I can't really think of anything right now." I couldn't quite figure out if she was bluffing or not.

But the rest of the student council wasn't there, and judging from the lack of panic in the room, I could believe there weren't really any pressing tasks at hand.

"So put another way, that means you still can't get any actual work started…," I muttered.

"Of course," Yukinoshita replied dispassionately. "We were only just given the order today." Considering she was saying this was fresh news, I couldn't sense whether she was particularly upset. She'd probably realized what the term *self-restraint* meant, and that granted her a bit of composure.

The school administration had demanded that they exercise self-restraint, and Yukinoshita would have taken that just as I had. Having a topic in common is the spice that energizes a conversation. I'd use this as the first step to expand the discussion.

I returned my attention to Yukinoshita. "But you figure you can make a move here, huh? Well, yeah. All they really did was ask that you exercise self-restraint. Worse comes to worst, you could technically refuse."

The school administration had been the ones to use the term *self-restraint*, and that was also Miss Hiratsuka's way of getting a concession. The subject of "self-restraint" was "self," implying making a decision using your own judgment. Essentially, it was tacitly indicating they weren't forcing the decision to cancel the prom.

Yukinoshita and Isshiki must have been planning to take advantage of how the cancellation hadn't been made explicit, deliberately misunderstanding it to make things worse. They were taking the most self-interested interpretation of the news, so they had the final say.

Of course, Yukinoshita grasped what I was getting at. With a wry smile, she opened her mouth to say, "Though I would very much prefer to avoid that."

"Using 'self-restraint' against them is fine," I said. "But just hinting that you're planning to carry it out anyway isn't going to get them on board."

"I understand that. What I intend to do is have a discussion based on that fact," Yukinoshita answered, without so much as an eyebrow twitch.

Of course, I don't think she'd just muscle her way through. Going off the rails would be the nuclear option, limited to one use only. If they wanted to have a prom the following year as well, they couldn't do anything reckless.

Her aim was brinkmanship diplomacy through implying the use of force. They were going to make a threat: *We'll hold it but not under school management, without any of your oversight. It'll be even worse than what you anticipated. Are you okay with that?* They weren't actually going to do it, but they planned to insinuate it and seek a concession. It was a pretty brutal force tactic, but it did still leave room for negotiation.

The issue was what cards they would bring to the table afterward.

I rose from my seat and went to the whiteboard that had been pushed up to the wall. Yukinoshita sighed a little but didn't move to stop me.

Drawing the whiteboard close to me, I spun it around.

I'd only been able to get a brief glance at it before, but I found more or less what I expected—the plans moving forward that Yukinoshita and Isshiki must have thought up and their new direction for the prom.

They must have been having a pretty heated discussion, as the whole entire board was covered in an intense written dispute. From the jumble of characters, it looked like both of them had contributed. The careful rows of characters in orderly horizontal lines, though with lots of question marks, had to be Yukinoshita, while the enthusiastic scrawls going in every direction with a noticeable number of exclamation points seemed to be Isshiki's.

From what I could tell, they'd both put forth ideas, countering each other in an attempt to come up with better plans.

"You two were thinking together?" I asked.

"More like I was shooting down Yukino's ideas, and she was trashing mine as we went along…," Isshiki said.

"Ahhh. Constructive."

Given the current deadlock, starting with two plans was worthwhile—so at least they would choose one of them or come up with a compromise. You'd never make progress if you never proposed an alternative and just kept objecting to every single suggestion. Creating an opposing framework is what enables you to push a discussion forward. If you just argue over whether you can

do it, you'll always wind up concluding that you can't.

So I looked at the whiteboard, wondering what they settled on.

Hmm, where's the conclusion here? It did seem like they wrote down a lot of stuff, but the board was like a lot of people's class notes—incomprehensible to anyone but the person who wrote it.

"…So what were your conclusions?" I asked.

"Ummm…the parts that have red circles around them," Isshiki told me.

"Hmm." As I gave the board another once-over, I saw the scribbled circles and scanned them in order.

Fancy, *wholesome*, *dress code*, *guidelines*, *official*, *no uploading*, *OK!*

That was all.

"Hmm… I basically get… Wait, no, I don't…" *Huh? The heck is this? Some kind of riddle? I, like, almost get it, but also not… But what does it all meeeeean?* And so I turned to them, requesting an explanation with my gaze.

Yukinoshita traced the rim of her paper cup with her fingers, gaze dropping to the ripples in her tea as she let out a little breath. "You came in while we were in the middle of putting it all together." She wasn't accusing me, just stating the facts, so I didn't quite know what to say. It was true she'd been standing in front of the whiteboard right before I'd entered the student council room. Had she really been just finishing things up?

"Oh…well…sorry," I said, apologizing for getting in the way, and Yukinoshita shook her head as if to say, *Don't worry about it*.

To shake off the slight awkwardness, I cleared my throat and asked out loud this time, "So what does this mean, exactly? I have no clue."

This time, Yukinoshita hesitated, a bit uncomfortable about it. "…I told you it's still under review, didn't I?" But once that was out of her mouth, her gaze slid away, and her lips closed. Well, Yukinoshita didn't want me in on this, so I doubted she was going to explain in detail now.

I glanced over at Isshiki. *Okay, ready, set, Iroha-chaaan?* But she did not seem nearly so enthusiastic

"Ummm…to really boil it down, it's like, we make guidelines for the dress code? I guess?" Isshiki turned to Yukinoshita.

Unsurprisingly, Yukinoshita couldn't stand leaving the explanation unfinished, and she opened her mouth with great

reluctance. “We intend to restrict clothing that’s too excessive or revealing, and we’ll make arrangements with a rental costume vendor and introduce students to them in order to create a lineup.”

“Ohhh, huh…”

That made sense. By establishing a certain standard for clothing beforehand, they meant to guarantee the students would be dressed appropriately. I’m sure most of the students would be renting outfits, so those would automatically meet student council guidelines.

But you wouldn’t necessarily have every single student going along with that. “What about people who get their own?” I asked.

Drawing circles with her index finger, Isshiki replied smoothly, “We figure if everyone else is picking more conservative dresses, they might lean that way themselves so they won’t be the odd one out.”

“Ahhh, the pressure of conformity.”

“That’s the worst way to put it…” Isshiki shot me a weary, aggrieved look.

Uh, but that’s literally what you said…

Still, it’s not like absolutely everyone would pick up on those social cues. In any era, there’s bound to be some Seventeen CosmoGirls with Vogue thoughts in their heads who will be thinking, like, *You’re different, and it’s time for you to shine! Set yourself apart with the ultimate super-hot, just-a-bit-sexy fashion!* ☆ *A whole week of mix-and-match prom looks!* If you want to do prom for a whole week, you’ve got glitter for a brain.

“There’s gonna be people who want to stand out, though, since it’s a big occasion. They’ll dress that way on purpose,” I pointed out.

“I’m sure. We have plans for such contingencies as well,” Yukinoshita answered briefly, but she didn’t say anything more.

However, the clues at hand led straight to the correct answer. “…Would anyone actually obey the rule of no uploading to social media?” I asked, tapping the item written in smaller characters from the rest. Maybe it was an issue of space near the bottom of the board, or maybe it was lack of confidence.

At that, Yukinoshita let out a dismal sigh. “Well, it will be worthwhile to say that, just to caution them. It is unlikely, though.”

Isshiki, on the other hand, was rather gleeful as she remarked, “Even if they do break the rules and something happens, that’s their

own responsibility, right? They're all old enough."

I mean, people are *talking about lowering the age of majority and stuff, so I guess you could treat an eighteen-year-old as an adult… But I just know there's going to be complaints*, I was mentally grumbling.

"However," Yukinoshita added, "we understand that forbidding this behavior won't ensure they'd understand. And so instead, we'll be hiring an official professional photographer. We'll have them sell prints and data."

"You don't get many opportunities to have professional photos taken, after all," added Isshiki. "We figured it could work as a fun bonus."

"Huhhh, you think…?"

Isshiki was smugly chuckling and apparently rather proud of herself. It seemed that for girls, there was a demand for pretty pictures.

It wouldn't be too difficult to arrange to have a photographer there to sell photos. These days, I hear some schools ban parents from taking photos at school events, and the school sells them instead. Basically, you could consider this something similar.

Apparently, in previous generations, you'd have a photographer going along for every event, like field trips and outings and such, and the school would officially sell photos. Maybe the idea would go over well with the parents. I also hear sometimes back in the day kids would use that to try to get photos of their crushes when they wrote out the numbers of the ones they wanted to buy on the envelopes. Then their classmates would find out and casually be like, *But you're not in that picture, though?* Then it would turn into a class rumor and merciless teasing, and then the next day, they'd get a rejection before even reaching the confession stage. If you've ever experienced something like that, then you could get them to understand without having to really explain about the photo sales… I guess you don't need that rejection experience, huh?

Anyway, this plan concocted by Miss Capable but Clueless and Miss Crafty Crook—establishing the official protocols, bringing up the argument that it's ultimately your own responsibility, and if complaints and grievances came up, deflecting attention to the advantages—seemed to be functional, in its own way. Setting aside whether that would be enough to convince the student body, it would work as an excuse to the parents.

Their plans did indeed make sense. At the very least, they

seemed worthwhile for the purpose of putting a Band-Aid on the areas the parents had complained about.

Staring at the whiteboard, I let out a sigh. “I see… It’s not bad.”

“Thank you,” Yukinoshita replied briefly.

Actually, even if it was just an outline, it was impressive they’d thought it up in such a short time.

But there were still plenty of holes. “So how good are the odds on this?” I asked, rapping my knuckles on the whiteboard, and Isshiki was silenced with an *urk*. She made a face at me instead.

But Yukinoshita didn’t even twitch an eyebrow. “Decent enough,” she replied evenly. “We’ve considered their requests and constructed a road map to actualizing them. I believe the odds are not at all low.”

“Well, I guess. If you accepted just about all their demands, then you’d get the okay… Normally.”

But I knew it wouldn’t go like that.

This time was not normal.

The purpose of the opposition’s complaints was to get the prom canceled. They weren’t making stipulations to have them fulfilled or to improve the event. It was possible they wouldn’t accept any proposal, no matter how many concessions we made. And if we wanted to clear that problem, we would need another move.

And that move was where Yukinoshita and Isshiki’s weaknesses lay.

To think of it another way, this was where there was room for me to intervene.

Up until this point, I’d been waiting for my moment to bring that up as I examined Yukinoshita’s course of action, but if I was going to say my piece, now was the time. When I glanced at Isshiki, she noticed and gave me a little nod.

“Let me ask something, Yukinoshita,” I said. She shot me a skeptical look.

“…Ah, I’ll be over there.” Isshiki pretended to sense we wanted her to go, and she tried to stand from her seat.

But Yukinoshita stopped her. “Wait. This is about the prom, isn’t it? Then it would be best for you to be present as well, Isshiki.”

“Ahhh…yeah, I guess so,” Isshiki said vaguely as she gave me a sidelong glance. I nodded to let her know I didn’t mind. Isshiki wasn’t entirely happy about that, but she sank back into her seat.

I got that Yukinoshita didn’t want me interfering. I’m sure she

wanted to avoid even talking to me in person at all, now. I could understand the psychology behind wanting to sandwich Isshiki between us. But Yukinoshita had to also be thinking that having someone else here would make it harder for me to talk.

That meant I'd just have to brace myself for that. "…Can I help you with the prom?"

Yukinoshita seemed surprised that I would ask so directly, her eyes widening. Then she looked down, and her mouth opened, about to say something.

I cut her off before she could. If I just waited for her to answer, I'm sure she'd say the same thing as before. So I quickly explained my logic to keep her from doing that. "I think your plan actually isn't bad, but there's a lot of uncertainty. You should be considering an alternative, too. And since I'm shooting down your idea, I'll come up with something, too." And yes, I know this wasn't what I had planned on saying to her. But I had to say something, or I would choke.

"This situation is what it is," I continued. "I'm not going to pull anything. I'll ultimately operate under your instructions, and you can just think of me as your side advisor for coming up with ideas. So then it'll be the same as giving instructions to Isshiki and everyone else, right? It's been like that most of the time before, too. This is no different."

Yukinoshita bit the edge of her lip, listening in silence. Her gaze was trending downward, focused on her hands, and I couldn't detect any anger or sadness in it. It was like she was trying to keep her emotions in check. "…Yes, I'm sure it would be no different from before."

"So then—," I began.

"Then ultimately," she interrupted, her eyes still downcast, "I'll be entirely relying on you…" Though her tone was quiet and calm, the clear resignation there would make your heart clench to hear.

Yukinoshita lifted her head with a weak smile. Gently, as if admonishing a naive child, she laid out her case. "That's why I want to change that. You understand what my sister was trying to say, don't you?"

"…Yeah." My head dropped, and I let my eyes fall.

I don't think I was the only one who understood the word *codependency*—she did, too.

And she was not okay with it. She was trying to correct this

mistaken relationship and to stand on her own two feet.

While I, on the other hand, couldn't even question whether it was right or wrong. I was just pontificating with vague, empty nonsense that sounded good. I was fixated on this warped, deadlocked relationship.

"But…I think I should take responsibility for that, too. It's not only the fault of just one person," I managed to finish saying, and when I looked up again, my eyes met with Yukinoshita's. Her face was twisted up in pain, but her gaze slid down, and her chin fell. I couldn't bring myself to say anything more.

But I felt like I had to get this out now, or I never would. I was fully aware of what a hassle I was, how gutless, how pathetic.

So even if it was really, really, really hard to say and I really didn't want to say it, I had to. "You're right. Maybe it'd be fine if I didn't do anything this time. But that won't solve the underlying issue. If the way we've been doing things has been a problem, then we look for another one. We find a different method, a different way of thinking about things, a different way of interacting…"

Isn't there a better way to put this? I thought, searching for the words, but times like this are when my reasoning and self-consciousness really screw with me. The moment I gave voice to all those vague, hazy things inside me, they gained form and shifted away from the truth. I was frustrated, as I realized I was clenching my fists underneath the desk. Relaxing them, I rubbed my sweaty palms on my pants.

I didn't know if this would help her hear me.

"So…no matter how it turns out, I want to take responsibility for it."

And I didn't care.

"So…I want to…save you."

This was for my own sake. I just wanted to say it; I just wanted to get it out. Really, I was just shoving my own desires on her. Being aware of that, I couldn't face her.

"…Thank you. But it's fine now… The sentiment is enough." Her soft voice, quiet as snow falling in the middle of the night, was so beautiful and transient. There was a strength in it that made it hard not to look at her. Her expression was so peaceful, my breath caught at how lovely her smile was.

In a quiet like blooming frost, Yukinoshita continued in a fragile voice. "The root cause is me. I'm always leaving everything

to you and Yuigahama… That's why we're stuck in this halfway stage. I have to settle this, or nobody will be able to move forward. The one who should take responsibility is me."

"…That's not true. I have responsibility, too," I said, my throat tight, but Yukinoshita lowered her eyes with a tiny shake of her head.

I gritted my teeth, wondering how I should respond to her rejection, when Isshiki cut in. "Um, is that what this is about?" she complained, giving Yukinoshita and me a scornful glance.

Neither of us could reply to that question. At this rate, no amount of conversation would bring us to a conclusion. Our opinions would never reach a consensus. Yukinoshita and I knew this, which was why we both chose silence.

In the end, I couldn't really reach her.

I needed words to have any chance of getting this across to her, but it wasn't enough. I'd learned that painfully well over the past year. It's arrogant to say a conversation is all you need to understand each other, to get each other—and if you seriously think you have a shot at understanding without words, that's pure fantasy.

That's why I can never make up my mind what words to pick. It's why I worry about phrasing and ramble on and on about things that don't matter. It's why, in the end, I can't say a single word of what matters.

But what I wanted to communicate to her wasn't words. Words just didn't work for this.

So then the answer was simple.

I had my way of doing things—our way of doing things.

"Fine. I won't say any more. I won't help you," I said, rather brisk and unequivocal for me. In the corner of my eye, I saw Isshiki was a bit surprised, as she let out a little puff of air.

Yukinoshita gave me a peaceful nod in return, wearing a faint smile of something like relief.

I'd known what her answer would be. But I'd had to say that, to make sure. I'd had to make our respective positions clear, or we'd be stuck here forever.

I grinned mirthlessly. "…But I'm not saying I won't oppose you."

"Pardon?" Isshiki tilted her head.

Yukinoshita was speechless and a bit confused, but she seemed

to realize what I was getting at, her eyes narrowing.

I responded with an ironic smile, raising loosely clenched fists in an unassuming manner in front of my chest. “When you and I fail to find common ground, there’s only one thing we’d do, right?” This had been the only idea I’d sort of vaguely come up with during my conversation with Miss Hiratsuka.

If a dialogue with words wouldn’t cut it, then I just had to demonstrate with action.

“I’m already in for a penny, so I wouldn’t feel right about it if the prom didn’t happen,” I said. “But I can’t agree with the way you do things… So I have no choice but to do it myself.”

“Are you being serious?” Yukinoshita squinted at me, and I nodded back at her.

Though it was one-sided, it was logical, as an excuse for me to be involved in the prom. If I bowed out completely, it would be a denial of how our relationships had been, the way the Service Club was.

So I had to try—to prove our time together had not been codependency.

In bringing that to an end, I think for the first time, we could establish a healthy relationship for ourselves.

“The competition still isn’t over,” I said. “There’s no need for the whole Service Club to be doing things the same way. So I don’t mind if you take a different approach. Or am I wrong?” I knew she’d said something similar to me before, too. She’d remember that, too.

She lowered her eyes and bit the side of her lip. The core of the reasoning when the two of us had clashed, the framework of competition, hadn’t changed. Meaning it should still be in effect.

I waited for an answer, but all I heard was a shallow sigh. She was agonizing over it but not giving me anything clear.

“I think it’s fine,” Isshiki said with a sigh, the still-silent Yukinoshita in the corner of her eye. “I don’t care either way. If we make the prom happen, I’m not going to question how. And even the stuff Yukino’s saying won’t be an issue, then, right?” Isshiki sounded mildly detached.

Yukinoshita was struck speechless.

A long silence followed. Or maybe the silence was her answer.

I sighed.

Unsurprising. Even if I bring up the competition now, she won’t get

on board… She might be competitive, but she's not *that* simple.

But whatever Yukinoshita's answer was, my stance would not change.

"…Well, I'm not trying to ask permission here. I'm just going to do it. So just be aware." This wasn't even a negotiation to begin with. More accurately, this wasn't formatted like one. This was an announcement, that's all.

Yukinoshita was smart, so she would pick up on that. She sighed weakly as she chewed her lip. She closed her eyes like she was in pain, then touched her hand to her mouth in a thoughtful gesture.

The soft sound of her breathing was lost in the silence. But this was a different kind of quiet from her earlier wordlessness. This silence wasn't a rejection—I could sense that it was a blank canvas for the purpose of moving onward.

Yukinoshita's fingertips stroked the thin line of her lips before she released a faint sound somewhere between a sigh and a mutter.

"Now…" I don't think she meant to say that out loud; her words were lost in the calm silence and vanished like mist.

When I leaned forward to ask her to continue, she slowly opened her eyes. The tension was gone from her harsh expression, the peace returned to her eyes.

Beautiful like frozen blue-white flame, but ephemeral. Her pure, dignified expression made my breath catch. I forgot to ask what she was going to say. I couldn't even look away.

"The one to win this competition will do whatever the other says… Are you…all right with that?" she asked. A sharp light shone in her blue-tinged eyes. Before, she had been almost brooding, but now she was looking straight at me.

I met her gaze firmly and nodded back. "Yeah, I'm all right with that."

It had been such a long time since I'd felt this, it gave me goose bumps—we'd had an exchange like this before. The familiarity of it brought a sigh of relief out of me.

The air relaxed.

Meanwhile, Isshiki muttered, "Huh? What's that supposed to be? Ew."

"Hey." When I shot her an accusatory look, she awkwardly lowered her head.

"I mean, it *is* a little gross, and I don't get what you guys even

mean… And, like, you're acting super smug about it." Isshiki was being really unreasonable with this string of complaints.

My expression was turning sour as I thought, *Seriously, Isshiki…*

That was when I heard a sudden chuckle.

"Yes, perhaps it is a little gross."

I looked over to see Yukinoshita, who apparently found all of this amusing. It felt like it had been a long time since I'd seen that carefree smile, like a flower blooming.

"Right?" said Isshiki with a nod.

It snapped the tension inside me, too, and I found myself going slack. "Listen…"

"It's a joke. But that was how it began, wasn't it?" Yukinoshita lightly cleared her throat to hide a chuckle, but the smile still lingered in her eyes.

Somehow gleeful and challenging, she turned her full attention to me. "So to confirm. We'll make the prom happen—I with my own methods, and you with your own. And whoever wins our competition can tell the other to do one thing, is that correct?"

"Y-yeah…" I offered a dazed response, and Yukinoshita nodded in satisfaction. I was just sort of staring at her smile of determination, my mouth half-open.

Yukinoshita must have felt dubious about my silence, as she gave me a look. "Was there something else?"

"Oh, no, I'm just, like, a little surprised you'd say yes…" Not sure how to put that, I glanced over to Isshiki to get her agreement.

But she didn't know anything about this competition stuff, so maybe that was why all I got was a grumpy *phew* and a shrug.

"It's nothing particularly mysterious," Yukinoshita said calmly, brushing the hair off her shoulders.

Well, it sure was to me.

As I was tilting my head, a proud smile suddenly filled her face, and she answered the riddle teasingly. "Didn't you know? I'm the competitive type."

Interlude…

That was basically a love confession. Or a lovers' quarrel. Or a breakup.

Whatever, not like it matters.

But I did feel like an idiot, having to sit there and listen to all that. Like, yes, I know this is none of my business; you didn't have to shove it in my face while I was sitting right there. Yeah, not cool. Can you blame me for calling them gross?

I honestly want him to just take responsibility.

I glared at the door one more time after he was gone.

I'd never expected he would so neatly, so perfectly, so entirely make things worse. I wanted to follow after him right that minute and give him an earful. He couldn't be saying stuff like that with such an earnest expression on his face.

You can barely tell at all if his eyes are even open or not, and his mouth is always twisted up or complaining. Everything he says is BS, and you can't tell if it's a lie or a joke. But if you mess with him a little, he immediately gets all flustered. Even then he hardly reacts and almost never responds.

But the worst part is that once in a blue moon, his eyes will get serious.

I really, really want him to take actual responsibility. I mean, he's never done it before.

So I don't want him to casually turn it into an excuse.

I had my head down the whole time he was talking, and he wasn't looking at my face. I mean, like, I know he couldn't see, but I wanted him to get a clue about that stuff. He and Yukino and Yui are all a big load of trouble, but I know I am, too.

This really is just trouble.

I'd done so much work to get started on this, but that memory was stopping my hands. I kept zoning out thinking about what had just happened, then glancing at the clock like, *It's gonna be about*

time to go home soon. I'd checked it five times now, but not even two minutes had passed. This was my eighth sigh.

On my ninth sigh, Yukino looked up from the computer and pressed her eyes. She wasn't wearing those glasses that were supposed to be good for eye strain—they were just placed to the side, on the desk, while she put in eye drops instead.

I was caught off guard when she wiped off a drop that streaked down her cheek, and I opened my mouth without thinking. "Um, how about we call it a day?"

Still with her fingers on her eye, Yukino tilted her head a little. Her expression was unusually attractive for her, and it freaked me out a little. "…Indeed. I'm going to stay here a bit longer for work, but you may go ahead, Isshiki."

"Oh, okay…" I studied her face. She seemed peaceful—the word *smile* seemed perfect to describe it, and I didn't quite know what to say. When someone is so nice to you, the guilt makes it actually hard to leave. *What do I do?*

Meanwhile, Yukinoshita moved on as if it was settled that I would be going home. "Also, could you assemble the student council tomorrow?"

"Huh? Oh, okay… Isn't that kinda fast? We've only just decided on our plan today, though?"

"I'll have something concrete by tomorrow. Besides, since we'll be making this prom happen, it would be best to prepare earlier, wouldn't it?" She seemed genuinely confused by my question.

Meanwhile, I was dumbfounded. “…So you’re totally sure.”

“I am.” Her answer hadn’t changed.

I think Yukinoshita noticed my unease, and her expression turned a bit troubled.

“Um…” I started to speak…and stopped. I had the words, but they probably weren’t for me to say.

Yukinoshita tilted her head like, *What is it?* waiting for me to continue.

But I thought it should have been someone else saying it, so I smiled weakly instead. “…Please don’t push yourself too much.”

“Thank you. But it’s not a problem,” Yukinoshita said, and her fingers clacked on the keyboard. The backlight on her pale face created a sad kind of beauty, the kind that really would disappear like snow.

“This is the last of it… Now I can put an end to it,” she muttered, and she wasn’t saying it to me. It was like the continuation of what she’d said earlier so quietly, and I looked down.

I scrambled to get my coat and things together and rushed to the door. Yukino had been harsher before. She was much gentler now, and I felt like I’d say too much if I kept talking with her like this. But it wouldn’t be fair to just come out and say that, not to mention annoying.

“…Then I’m off. Oh, and don’t forget to lock up!” I said cheerily.

“All right. Good night,” Yukino replied with a smile. Then she went back to staring at her computer, and the keys started clacking again.

She had way more motivation than before; call me crazy, but she might have even been having fun.

But then…when I left the student council room and looked back at her…

…I thought I saw her crying.

3

Yui Yuigahama continues to stand back and watch, to the end.

After leaving the student council room, I dragged myself along on leaden legs. The exhaustion of the long, long day weighed heavily on my body and my heart.

When I emerged from the school building, the sun had already set, and the coldness of the night soaked into me. A full-body shiver ran through me under the blowing wind, then I put on the coat I'd been carrying in my arms. A seeping sense of fatigue coiled around me, and even lifting my arms to wrap the scarf left hanging from my neck was too much trouble to bother. Fashion-wise, I was in the old Takanohana-*oyakata* style.

Shuffling to the bicycle parking lot mostly unconsciously, I suddenly realized something. *Oh yeah, it rained this morning, so I took the train.* I trudged back to the school gates.

But then on my way, I found Iroha Isshiki running along, skirt fluttering.

She seemed to notice me, too. She rushed up to me before I could call out to her, then immediately hit me with the *poff* of a mitten punch in the side.

"Ow…" She was wearing fuzzy mittens, so it didn't really hurt, but she was so grumpy I had to offer a little *oof*, to be polite.

But of course that didn't improve her mood; her eyes were ice-cold. "Are you stupid? Why are you making things worse?"

"Hold on there, you've got it wrong. I'm not the only one at fault. Yukinoshita was being like that, too, so…" I tried to make excuses, but Isshiki wasn't listening at all. She just jerked her face to the side and strode right off.

I followed her a step behind. "Let me finish? Look, when you're that stubborn and that much trouble…"

"Agh, thank you for the self-introduction."

“You’re welcome… Wait, I don’t mean me. Although it does apply,” I said as I sped up to catch up to her. But I couldn’t get any closer. “Hey, you’re walking kinda fast. Like you’re trying to shake off one of the recruiters by the station.”

“Oh, you can drop that, too,” she answered curtly without turning to face me.

Hmm, that was really cold. Even if I say, Vaaaanilla! Vanilla! Great pay! *she’s not gonna come follow me, huh?* So I decided to be the one to follow her.

I seemed to recall she was headed to the same place I was. Though we rode different lines, we still went to the same station. I continued stepping on Isshiki’s shadow as we walked for a while longer.

Neither of us said anything during that time; the only sounds were the crunch of falling leaves being kicked up, the bells of bicycles cheerily running past, and the sweep of the north wind.

It was no wonder Isshiki had issues with this. My conversation with Yukinoshita had ultimately ended with a failure to reach an accord—a kind of declaration of war, in fact. Isshiki didn’t know anything about the Service Club’s competition, so she wouldn’t understand what it all meant. Isshiki had told me to do this properly before we’d gone into the student council room, and now we were in this mess. I sincerely felt bad about that.

Maybe I should apologize…, I was thinking when, suddenly, Isshiki stopped. On the path that went along the park, illuminated by the light of two vending machines side by side, I could clearly see her shoulders slumping. She breathed a deep sigh and spun around toward me.

Before, she’d been more displeased, but now she seemed kind of exasperated. Without a word, she stabbed a finger toward the vending machines.

Does she mean she wants me to buy her one…? Well, if that would cheer her up, it was a small price to pay. Or maybe she was using the formality of buying her something to make peace. Is she a good person or what…?

With the clinking of coins as I stuck in some change, I selected some drinks. *A nice hot Max can, and then…a milk tea? No, maybe* shiruko *soup… Corn soup is also an option.* Well, whatever. When you can’t make up your mind, you press all the buttons at once.

Click. I held out my randomly bought drink to Isshiki. In my

right hand was a Max can, in my left, *shiruko*.

Isshiki made a face. “Why those two choices…?” she complained, but it seemed even she would feel bad about refusing, as she grudgingly chose the *shiruko*. There is that theory that Chibanese actually don’t choose the Max can…

Isshiki squatted down with the vending machine at her back, then removed her mittens to pop open the tab and have a drink. The *ahhh* that left her mouth afterward was visible in the air. “… Um, sorry.”

“About what?” Standing beside her, I opened my can, too. Sipping at it, I waited for her response.

Her lips barely moving, she muttered, “If I never brought up the prom, things wouldn’t have gotten all messed up.”

This meek, sulky Isshiki was so funny but also cute, and I couldn’t help but stare. Isshiki tugged her scarf up to hide half her face and said, muffled, “What…?”

I shook my head with a wry smile. “…That’s got nothing to do with it. Actually, it was perfect you did.”

“Huh?” Isshiki tilted her head up at me.

Maybe it was the warmth and sweetness of the canned coffee, but I think my tone may have turned unexpectedly gentle. It was weirdly embarrassing, and I looked up to the sky. “We have to draw a line somewhere, or we’d have kept on dragging things out. We needed a goal. Or, like, an end point. It would have gotten like this anyway over something else instead of the prom.”

“Oh, huh…” The weakness of her reply bothered me. When I looked back at her again, she was hugging her knees, head down in thought. But this wasn’t something she had to feel bad about.

Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and me. At some point, the triangle between the three members of the Service Club had turned into something warped. Of course, it was warped right from the beginning. But we’d revised it bit by bit over time, and I’d thought that space had been changing into a comfortable one.

I was partially responsible for things falling apart. I wouldn’t let it be unnatural, but then I wanted everything to stay as it was. I would cover up whatever I had to with vague, superficial words in the hopes that it would slide by.

An unstable situation like that probably would have come undone anyway, no matter what started it. It could have been the prom, or just Haruno Yukinoshita. It was fair to say Isshiki had been

dragged into it. I was the one who should be apologizing.

"I'm the one who's sorry. For messing everything up," I said.

Isshiki swayed back and forth, drawling apathetically. "Ehhh… It's totally whatever. Like I said before, I don't care either way. I mean, like, if the prom is a success, then I'm good, you know."

"Hmm…" I gave her an apathetic, drawn-out reply right back, and that brought the conversation to a pause.

My canned coffee was gradually cooling in my hands. But neither of us rushed to finish our drinks. Maybe it was the exhaustion of a busy day. And the day after that was going to be even busier.

Despite believing I'd stay as far away from work as I could, suddenly I was trying to get involved in the prom of my own accord. Though I'd been against it initially, Isshiki's enthusiasm had overcome me in the end. Just where did that passion of hers spring from?

"…Hey, why are you actually that fixated on the prom?" I asked her.

"Where's this coming from?" Isshiki gave me a skeptical look, scooting an inch away from me.

"Uh, since you never really explained it." Her enthusiasm had gotten across, but that was it. That had been enough to make us want to help her out, because we knew her well enough.

Back in the clubroom, she'd gone off about being prom queen and stuff, but I really doubted that was serious. Isshiki would bluff to get through moments like those, and she would make silly jokes and say a bunch of random stuff, but she was also really cunning as hell, so she always knew what something was really about. So she'd have her own reasons for the prom, too.

Sticking her index finger straight up to touch it to her chin, Isshiki pondered with a *hmm* as she started to talk. "Yeah…I guess it really is, you know, 'cause Miss Hiratsuka was leaving."

"…You knew about that before?"

"Yeah, basically. I'm doing the farewell address, right? So I overheard it when the teachers were talking," she said like it was nothing.

Wow, she's something. She knew but didn't say a word to anyone. She was planning out the whole prom and didn't even let it show on her face, huh…?

When I nodded appreciatively to indicate I was listening, Isshiki

got a little bashful. “So I was thinking, you know? We have to give her a proper send-off, or I think we’ll regret it.”

“You care about her that much…” My hand came to my mouth to smother a sob.

No way—is she actually a good person after all? What a beautiful love between student and teacher… Isshiki, of all people, the one who’s been causing Miss Hiratsuka grief just about every day, then acting like a little brat when her teacher comes down on her and weaseling her way out of trouble with her cheeky nonsense… Miss Hiratsuka, your love has actually been reaching your students…

But I was only a bit moved for the briefest of moments, as Isshiki sneaked her gaze away and muttered, “Oh, uh, well, you don’t have to go that far…but you could!”

“Huh? What? What was that?” Now this was really sounding like excuses. Excuses that did not fly.

But Isshiki avoided answering with a deliberate-sounding *keff, keff* to clear her throat, and then with a bright, charming smile, she looked up at me teasingly. “But you’re that type, aren’t you? Like, I can see you be like, *I couldn’t do aaaanything* and then really regretting it after.”

“Well, that’s true…” I had just such regrets right that very moment, so that even came out sincere.

Hearing that, Isshiki nodded in satisfaction. “I’m probably that type, too.” That was a little surprising to me.

A sad smile crossed her face at my confusion, and she gazed off into the distance. “I may not look like it, but I have no friends, right?”

“How do you even see yourself…?”

“Hmph!”

“Please continue.” I bobbed my head a few times to apologize for interrupting, prompting her to go on. She glared coldly but then sucked in a big breath and stared at the ground. Toying with a pebble at her feet with the toes of her loafers, she started up again at an easy pace. “It’s just you guys. So I want to give you a proper send-off…you, Yukino, Yui, and Hayama…and might as well toss in Tobe and the guys while we’re at it.”

She spoke so gently, assembling the words with such hesitation, that before I knew it, my mouth was relaxing into a smile. I had to come up with some joking comeback, like *Whoa now, is my junior the most powerful or what?* or the corners of my eyes might even

relax and start watering.

"Aha! So you're actually a good person, eh?" I said.

"It's so that I won't have regrets. I'm doing it for myself. It's not like it's for you." Isshiki was really emphasizing that point, puffing out her chest proudly. Her pale hair, translucent under the light of the vending machines, shifted to reveal a peek of her pink ears. But I'd pretend I didn't see that. I wasn't opposed to letting her assertion stand.

"…So that's why I want to have the prom, you know," Isshiki murmured with yearning, looking up at the night sky as if in a dream. "Going out of your way to do something that's a lot of trouble, thinking and brooding and exhausting yourself, panicking and getting sick of it and coming to hate it over a long period of time…then it's like you can finally give up on it. You want to say good-bye—like, now that's a relief!" she said with indifferent cheer in her smile, throwing up her hands. And I finally got it.

The process she spoke of was a path I would one day go down. I would experience that kind of ugly struggle until the end, and then I'd be able to accept our farewell.

"…Well, it's not like I don't get it," I muttered.

"Reeeally?" Isshiki replied, half-teasing.

Even though her manner was joking, there was a tinge of sincerity in her upturned eyes as she looked at me. So I didn't play with words, just giving her a wry smile in return.

"So then…" Isshiki grabbed the scarf dangling from my neck and got to her feet. Swinging her arm in a circle, she wrapped my scarf around my neck with the flair of a gymnast with a ribbon. "Do a better job, please." She was smiling, but her tone was scolding, unlike her lighthearted earlier manner. I was surprised by her white breath, close enough to touch me, and the experience of being chided by a younger girl, so I froze for a moment.

"O-okay. Sorry…," I said, inching back by millimeters to do up my scarf again—ninja-style, to hide my startled, embarrassed blushing.

Watching me, Isshiki breathed out a big, long *agh*. Then she grabbed the ends of my scarf again and started twisting and wrapping it. "If you don't do this right, then I won't be able to, either. This sort of thing really causes trouble for me, you know. I don't wanna. And it's a hassle," she said, pulling the scarf tight and twisting it up over my chest. Once she'd finished wrapping me up

so perfectly that there were no cracks for wind to slip in, she gave me a little kitty bop on top of it.

"Ow…"

With her fuzzy mittens and the twisted-up scarf, it didn't hurt at all.

But it did reach my heart.

X X X

I switched on the living room lights and quietly muttered, “I’m home.”

But there was no one to reply. Just the cold air.

My parents were at work, and Komachi had to have gone out somewhere. *And the cat…*, I wondered, flipping up the cover of the *kotatsu*. In the darkness, two shining points went *badiiing* ☆, and my eyes met those of the cat curled up underneath.

But Kamakura simply stared at me, with no meowing or woofing, not so much as a twitch. He just glowered at me: *You’re letting cold air in—close it already*. He would actually go out to welcome Komachi when she came home, but this was the treatment I always got. *Does he just not like me…?* I thought uneasily as I said, “Hi, Kamakura,” then lowered the cover again. While I was at it, I turned on the *kotatsu* for him, too. *Since it’s off while we’re out… Get nice and warm…*

After turning on the *kotatsu* for the honored household feline, I clicked the button on the remote to turn the room heater on low. Lukewarm air started blowing out, and I was finally able to get comfortable. Undoing the scarf wrapped tight around my neck, I breathed a deep sigh.

Normally, I’d go straight to lying around, but I didn’t have that kind of time. Quickly stripping off my coat and tossing it away, I flopped down on the sofa and started doing research on my phone. My search keyword was, of course, *prom*.

Though I’d said I would make the prom happen, all that had been settled was that I was going up against Yukinoshita. I still had no idea what I was doing, specifically. First, I had to do some research about proms, then think of what I could do.

I spent some time clicking around and reading, copy-pasting to the notepad app while adding in ideas that came to mind, over and over.

But everything I learned through my research was the same as what Yukinoshita and Isshiki had been putting together, and I wasn’t really getting anywhere. I used this info to come up with ideas, but I wasn’t going to get anything beyond what they already

had.

Although their choice to deal with the symptoms of the problem wasn't a mistake, it wasn't certain enough. If the parents and the school hit them with a no, they'd have to start over from scratch. That was why I had to think up another move, a different way to approach this, but… *Hmm, I dunnooo, I can't think of anythiiiing! I just can't think of aaany ideas!* I agonized, rolling around on the sofa.

We had only two weeks or so until the graduation ceremony. And if you considered the time needed to actually organize the event, I could use two or three days at most to come up with ideas. I had to have a project plan by then. That was a deadline I absolutely couldn't afford to miss.

No, wait. I should think more flexibly.

…I just can't break the deadline, right? It's not like we can't stretch it out? Ohhh, so that's it—they're making things more flexible on the editorial end, huh! What a godly move. So she's actually a genius, eh?

But this time, I wasn't dealing with an editor, like that time with the free bulletin. This was an event on a day that wasn't going to move. Schedule-wise, this was going to be harsher. It was fair to say we were in pretty bad shape right now.

It's all about the angle; change the point of view. Times like these, it's best to find another perspective. So I rolled off the sofa and nuzzled my way into the *kotatsu* face-first.

If someone else were to witness this, it would seem like a completely bizarre thing to do, but doing slightly weird things will give you ideas different from other people's. You can't be bothered about being seen.

When I shoved my face into the *kotatsu*, Kamakura jerked away from me in the faint light. He fled as far from me as he could go to the opposite corner, staring at me like, *The heck is with him…?*

Ah! That's it! Times like these, you have to take a helping hand from anyone, even a cat! If I take the cat's paw and press his beans to my eyelids, my tired eyes will be soothed, my stressed spirit will relax, the birds will sing and the flowers bloom, the world will be filled with peace, and we'll get a new Armored Core *game!*

So I reached out to take Kamakura's paw, and Kamakura shot out of the *kotatsu* like lightning.

I popped my face out of the *kotatsu* in an attempt to follow him and realized that Komachi was back. As she stood there with a

solemn look on her face, our eyes met.

"…What're you doing, Bro?" she asked coolly. Kamakura sidled up to her ankles, rubbing his head on her legs, and Komachi crouched down to aggressively scrub him all over.

Her attitude toward me, however, was brusque. "Don't be lying around in your uniform—go get changed. It'll get wrinkly and covered in cat hair."

"O-okay…," I said, standing up and sliding off my tie as I headed for my room.

I quickly got changed into the tracksuit I wore indoors, and when I returned to the living room, Komachi had already changed into her at-home wear and was going around the kitchen.

"Have you eaten, Bro?" she asked.

"Ah, not yet."

"Mom made hot pot. Are you okay with that?"

"Mm… I mean, like, that's all there is."

I went around the kitchen as well, peeking in to see if there was anything else, just in case. But there was nothing that seemed good aside from the earthenware pot bubbling on the stove. *I can't even remember eating any dinners aside from hot pot lately…* With the *somen* pitcher in the summertime and the hot-pot pitcher in the wintertime day after day, she was gonna be MVP of the year at this rate.

When Komachi noticed my disappointment, she put a hand to her waist, swinging a ladle as she chided me. "If you don't like it, then do it yourself."

"Yeah, okay…" She was right, so I had no choice but to agree. My parents still made sure to cook, even though they were busy, so I'm thankful to them. Respect there, for real.

Well, compared with *somen*, which is just a fastball the whole game, the charm of hot pot is a plethora of curveballs, like *chanko* mixed hot pot, *mizutaki*, kimchi curry, and even *zosui* udon to finish off the broth, so I guess it's somewhat better… But if you tweet something like that, you're going to get a mountain of obnoxious unsolicited advice in your replies: *You can have more variety with somen too! Just be creative!* Shuddup, we have *somen* at my house because it's easy; if you make more work for yourself with creativity, you're defeating the purpose. And then if you tweet *that*, you get a stupid reply like *Really great somen is good without frills. Please come over again tomorrow. I'll serve you some really good soba*.

Shuddup, tomorrow's too sudden. I've got plans, you know. People like this will generally start going on about the taste of the ingredients and tell you to just eat it plain first, then try it with salt. Ingredient nerds, salt nerds, and dashi nerds just never shut up.

Look, when you're eating, you can't have anyone in your way. You've got to feel free; it has to bring your relief. So doesn't that mean eating with Komachi is the greatest? Big Bro is always saying so, right? A sister's all you need.

Anyway, I got two bowls, filled them with rice for myself and Komachi, and brought them to the *kotatsu*.

Next, Komachi, finished with her brisk preparation, carried over the pot. She cleared off the *kotatsu*, put down the pot stand, and set the pot on top of it with a *ta-daa*. Once she'd arranged the chopsticks and serving bowls and everything, we were ready.

She generously ladled out some of the hot pot into the two bowls, then pushed them both toward me. "Here, which do you want?"

"They're both the same…" *They taste the same anyway, in the end… I'm not feeling that positive about the hot pot in the first place…*, I was thinking, but I found myself examining both bowls, comparing their contents.

One of them had a bit more vegetables, while the other had a bit more pork. It wasn't like there was a huge difference. But if she was telling me to choose, then I had to choose. I'd forced Isshiki to pick between a Max can and *shiruko*, too, after all.

"I see…" I was staring at the bowls as I pondered this when Komachi tilted her head.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing," I answered, and I took the bowl with more pork in it.

Komachi brought the remaining bowl toward her and clapped her hands together. "Well then, let's eat."

"Yeah, let's." After chanting our thanks in unison, we both got munching. The Chinese cabbage and pork had been simmered to perfection. *Ohhh, this is all right. I'm kinda okay with this, actually.* Hot take: Give a boy meat, and he won't even complain. We ate silently for a bit, while away in the kitchen, Kamakura could be heard crunching away on his cat food.

"Oh yeah, you're back early today, huh?" I muttered.

The two of us hadn't had dinner together for the past few days,

maybe since our modest family celebration after Komachi passed her exams. Recently, she'd been coming home late from hanging out with friends or going out to eat as a reward, or in celebration of passing.

Komachi nodded as she chewed her Chinese cabbage. "Yeah, well, I've been busy after exams."

"What are you so busy with…?" I asked.

Komachi reflected with an *umm* as she started folding down her fingers, counting off.

"A wrap party, a congratulations party, a thank-you party, a reunion party, a hello party…"

"How many parties are there…?"

And, like, what's a hello party? Who are you saying hello to? Pathos? Or courage? In that case, first you have to say farewell, no tears…

As I tried to puzzle through the unfamiliar terms, Komachi, now done counting on her fingers, energetically thrust up a fist with a bright smile. "Soooo I didn't really have any plans today, so I guess this is the day of my big-bro party? Tee-hee, that's worth a lot of Komachi points!"

"I see…"

So she settled on the big-bro party by process of elimination, huh? Yes, well, it's fine, though. But, like, that's actually pretty amazing, having plans to go out several days in a row. She's got the makings of a real social butterfly, the type to go out drinking over every little thing. Isn't it a struggle, spending all your time going out like that…? It seems painful mentally, physically, and economically.

"It's tough having a lot of friends, huh…?" I said earnestly while slurping my broth. I certainly couldn't relate.

But Komachi replied like it was nothing. "Well, it's not just kids from school. There's also everyone from cram school and the student council and all sorts of stuff. Also, you get connected on social media even before you enter school."

Oh, so that's who's at the hello party. The hell, man, having obligations before school even starts, that's hard mode.

"…Won't that make things awkward when you start school? Once you're actually there and you end up estranged from all those people you were expecting to be your friends, won't it be hard to face them?" I said.

Komachi froze, still holding her chopsticks. Then she smiled awkwardly, apparently really weirded out. “What an awful thing to say, Bro…”

“But it’s the truth…”

“Hmm, well, yeah…” Komachi folded her arms, considering, then immediately grinned. “But that’s just how it works, right? C’est la vie and all.”

So down-to-earth! Like the meteorite that killed the dinosaurs!

My little sister is so sharp-witted…, I thought, trembling with vague fears for my sister’s future, when a thought hit me. “Was Taishi there, too?”

Taishi—that is to say, Kawa-something’s little brother Taishi Kawasaki—made it into Soubu High School recently as well. And it seemed to me that he was growing attached to Komachi. If Taishi were also there at this hello party of hers, I would have to deal with such an undesirable who came close to Komachi beforehand!

I’d been thinking cruel thoughts, but Komachi’s response was even more cruel. “Yeah. Probably?” She didn’t even look up as she answered, serving up the items from the pot into the bowl.

“Ice-cold…”

So in her mind, I guess Taishi is order: primate, species: human, class: friend, huh…? She’s so indifferent to him, I kind of feel bad for him… Except I don’t!

X X X

After we’d eaten the hot pot down to the broth, we added rice to finish off the liquid, and once we’d scraped the bottom of the pot, my stomach was stuffed, so we spent the evening taking it easy with some after-dinner tea. Komachi put Kamakura on her lap, humming as she brushed him, while I flopped over onto my stomach for some more quality time with my phone.

I’d sort of decided on a general plan, but it was still lacking in specifics. I searched various terms like *prom* and *graduation party*, but I still didn’t find any information or inspiration, blowing a deep sigh as I rolled over again.

Then my eyes met Komachi’s, sitting diagonally from me. She cocked her head cutely, as if to say, *What?*

That was when something struck me.

"…You're just about to graduate, huh?" I asked. It was a brief question.

Komachi answered even more briefly, with a quiet "Yeah."

There had been so much excitement in the wake of her exams, so my attention had been entirely on her high school entrance, but her middle school graduation ceremony came first. There are differences between middle and high school, but both are still the celebration of a departure.

Thinking it might give me some hint about the prom, I tried casually asking, "So for graduation, it's like…what? What do you do?"

"Huh? What a weird question." Komachi made a face, but her gaze flicked upward, and she considered for me. "Graduation, huh…? Oh, Komachi's going on a graduation trip," she muttered, as if she'd only just remembered.

I instantly jolted up. "Wait, I haven't heard about that. What about your big bro?"

"Uh, you're not going. It's not with the family; I'm going with friends." She waved a hand in front of her face like, *No, no*.

No, no, you can't stay overnight on a trip! Big Bro won't allow that! The words started coming out from my throat, and I think I might have even said as much as "Won't all—," but seeing Komachi's unimpressed glare, I swallowed the rest.

Komachi isn't a little kid anymore… I can't really play the big brother and carp at her for stuff. Besides, Komachi has good sense; she wouldn't let things get weird or involve herself in anything dangerous. I sent her as much trust as I could in my eyes: *Komachi, Big Bro believes in you, okay?!*

Komachi seemed momentarily annoyed, but then she gave an exasperated sort of sigh, dropped her shoulders, and continued. "Also a graduation party and stuff. It's just a dinner with the whole class."

"Huhhh…" With that vague answer, I made a note of it on my phone app, just in case.

The graduation trip aside, something like a party I could vaguely imagine. They'd all go to a family restaurant or a yakiniku place or something and chat over a good meal. Or they could get the best of both worlds and go to the yakiniku family restaurant Akamon, said to be the first of its kind in the nation. I'd even say if you're born and raised in Chiba, Akamon is the only option for

yakiniku… Outside of Chiba, if you bring up yakiniku places, they'll answer Sengoku. Not like I know.

…But anyway, is "the whole class" really everyone? Times like these, there's always people who aren't invited, you know (personally researched). I'm quite knowledgeable about this topic.

So let's ask something else instead. "Isn't there anything else? Like, event-wise."

"Huh? Events?" Komachi asked, tilting her head dubiously. But something must have struck her, as she made an *ahhh* sort of noise. "…Ohhh, the sendaway is basically another event? I think? Not like I know."

"The sendaway… Oh, to send off the third years, huh?" Not being very familiar with the term, it took me a bit of time before I figured it out. But that was what they called the party to say farewell to the third-year students, huh?

Pulling up my memories of my middle school days, there had indeed been such an event, separate from the graduation ceremony. I remembered it had been mandatory for everyone to come and that we'd been forced to sing. They got mad at us tenors and yelled at us to sing properly. Now I even remembered how the girl accompanying on piano had cried and run off, and Orimoto and the girls' A-group had gone after her, and then they made me apologize…

Actually, that one thing maxed out my memory capacity for the sendaway, so I couldn't tell you anything else that happened.

"What do you do for that again?" I asked Komachi. "You sing something, right? Something like the *kabosu* song."

"It's the leaving-the-nest song."

"Yeah, that's the one. And then there's the other one that goes 'Our Mother Eeeearth.'"

"Yeah, yeah, that sort of thing. Well, 'Praise the Earth' is for the graduation ceremony, though. And we're having, like, a kind of play, too," she said.

A question mark briefly hung in the air between us, and then suddenly the door of my memory opened. "A play… Ahhh, I feel like there was something, like, you know. 'Under the bright liiiight of early spriiiing, first, we will…!"

Then Komachi caught up to me as if singing a round. "'First thing, we will!'"

"'Graduate!'"

"'Graduate!'" Divided into the boys' and girls' parts, we fully reenacted it up to the two-beat rest…

The silly exchange made me smile at Komachi. "…Something like that?"

Komachi smiled brightly back at me, and we sat there grinning at each other. And then, without changing her expression at all, Komachi shook her head. "Nope. Not all."

"Whaaat…? But we got all into it…" *If that's not the one, then why didn't you stop me earlier…?* I shot her a mildly reproachful look.

Komachi cracked an exasperated smile. "Like, that's the acclamation, and that was elementary school."

"Huh? Is that right? I seriously don't remember. I mean, I've only had an actual graduation twice in my life, from elementary and middle school. I haven't done that much graduating, you know," I said, while adding in a note about the sendaway on my phone, just in case. I didn't think it would be much use as a reference, but this notepad app would help me find ideas. You never knew what would lead to a light bulb moment. I added in notes about the songs, the play, and the acclamation while I was at it.

Perhaps the act of writing these notes was something like a solo *thought shower*, so to speak. Tamanawa taught me, after all, that you shouldn't come to a conclusion right away—all while immediately shooting down my ideas…

As I was indulging in some nostalgia for the dearly departed, Komachi seemed to be pitying me for whatever reason. "Oh yeah… You still haven't managed to graduate from *PreCure* and *Aikatsu!*, either, huh…?"

"Don't be dumb. You don't graduate from that; that's lifelong learning. The ones who stop watching haven't graduated—they've dropped out, okay?" I protested.

"In your case, that's called getting held back a year…" Komachi sighed in resignation.

I can always count on Komachi to get me. Seriously, looking back on my utter lack of growth this past year, saying I've gotten "held back" might actually fit quite perfectly. I found myself letting out a weak, masochistic laugh.

Komachi tilted her head curiously, but she wasn't going to press me, and she asked something else. "You don't have something like a

sendaway in high school?"

"Ohhh, I don't think we do." At the very least, I didn't think there was any event like that around this time the year before. Maybe individual clubs would have some sort of send-off party, but not having been in any clubs at the time, I didn't quite know. I should probably ask someone later. And so I added in my notepad app, *Talk with Totsuka* ♡, and now we're good!

I was satisfied with this rather excellent conclusion to my solo *thought shower*, when I looked up from my phone and saw Komachi's profile as she leaned her chin on her hand on the *kotatsu*.

"Ohhh… Well, it's high school, after all. Guess you don't do that sort of thing," Komachi grumbled as if she was just a tad disappointed, then started stroking Kamakura and humming. I'd heard that melody on her lips before. It was probably a standard graduation song.

Listening to that somewhat lonely sound, I closed the notepad app on my phone. "There's nothing like a sendaway…but this year, we are having a prom." I opened up the browser to show her the page I'd been looking at just a minute ago, holding my phone out to her.

Komachi peeked at it like, *Show me, show me*, then made an admiring noise. "Huhhh… Oh wow, what is this? Wow… You're doing this?" Her eyes were sparkling.

With a small smile that was slightly strained around the lips, I nodded back. Though I didn't actually say anything, I was announcing that I would make it happen.

It wasn't like there was any basis for it that I could explain logically. We didn't have enough time; we were nowhere near ready. I didn't even know what I should do.

But I was going to make this prom happen.

That was the one thing that had been settled.

X X X

Even after a night's sleep, I still hadn't gotten over my exhaustion.

I'd spent until late the evening before hanging around with Komachi in the *kotatsu* and nodding off. Caught between wakefulness and dreaming, I'd gone to my room to fall into bed, where I'd slept like the dead.

And then before I knew it, it was morning, and I just barely made it on time to school. Though I'd skipped breakfast and my grooming routine, making it before the bell would be dicey.

Komachi had to have fallen asleep around the same time as me, but she shot sharply out of bed, got herself smartly dressed, and shrewdly slithered off to school before me.

I should also have had enough sleep time, mathematically speaking, but my head was still wrapped in a drowsiness that made my feet on the pedals feel somewhat heavier. I couldn't get my mind or the pedals to work right, and the needle of my watch was the only thing moving as it should.

Starting that day, I had to deal with the prom.

There wasn't much time left, and I didn't have a lot to work with. And I still hadn't come up with any concrete plan. And there were some people who would be hard to face, after we'd been so sharp with each other before.

Thinking about that made my legs feel even heavier, but I somehow managed to heave my way along on my bike, slipping through the back entrance right before the warning bell.

As I rushed to the entrance right before class started, it was buzzing with the kids who'd finished morning practice, as well as those like me who were skating in under the wire, and I found a pinkish-brown head of hair among them. With each little step, the backpack on her back, her long scarf, and her bun bounced side to side.

Seeing Yuigahama reminded me of how we'd parted ways the day before, and I was hesitant to call out to her. While I was busy waffling, she reached the shoe boxes and changed into her indoor shoes. Then she noticed me and paused for a moment. With a faint smile, she raised a hand just slightly in front of her chest to give me a casual wave.

It was really embarrassing, so I gave her a few quick nods in return, tugging up my scarf as I trotted closer.

Yuigahama combed at her bun with her fingers as she murmured, "Morning."

"…'Sup."

Our eyes met for only an instant, and my gaze immediately dropped to my indoor shoes. As I was shoving my feet into them, crushing the heels, she patiently waited beside me. When I hopped a little on my toes to signal we could go, she nodded and began to

lead me off.

"Ahhh, that was close. I just barely made it in time," Yuigahama said as she quickly undid her scarf and wrapped it up in her arms to hold it. She was acting cheery as always, which was exactly why it felt so wrong. I didn't know how to respond.

I knew intellectually that if she was trying to signal nothing was wrong, it would be best not to ask anything about what had happened the day before—but it seemed insincere to me to not touch on it. Once we'd passed enough of the oncoming people in the halls to have a one-meter radius of privacy, I lowered my voice to ask, "Were you okay, yesterday?"

"Huh?" Yuigahama seemed confused by the sudden question, looking at me with a little tilt of her head. But she figured it out quickly and covered her cheeks. "Ahhh, yeah. I'm totally okay! Sorry, like… Eh-heh, wow, this is kind of embarrassing… Or like I said before, it happens all the time."

She panicked and got shy, then embarrassed, then sulky, shifting through a kaleidoscope of expressions before settling on a smile. That meant the conversation was done, and my lips relaxed as well. I nodded. Even if I thought there was something, I wasn't about to probe it, pick it apart, or push her away. I wasn't a *total* child. After sharing this much time together, even if it hadn't been that long, I'd gradually gotten better at finding the distance and places that were most comfortable for the both of us.

Yuigahama started going up the stairs, her steps sounding lightly half a pace ahead of me. A beat later, I followed after. It was right before class would start, and most everyone else must already have gone into their classrooms, as the hall was mostly empty.

When we approached the landing, Yuigahama turned halfway back to me. "What about you? How did things go after that?"

"Hmm, well, you know. I've decided to try doing the prom."

"Oh." I caught a glimpse of a relieved smile, then she faced forward again.

I nodded at her back. "So…" My lips were stiff and reluctant. "You can leave without me today." It wasn't like we'd promised to walk together all the time. I suspected that expressly saying this was a sign I was being overly self-conscious, and I was truly disgusted with myself. I wanted to yell at myself, *Hey, dumbass, stop misinterpreting already*.

But Yuigahama quietly nodded for me. "Okay. Got it."

That was a relief, and I was able to add more. “Or, like, not just today—it’ll be like that, well, for a while.”

“…Yeah, I know. You’re helping Yukinon, right?” Yuigahama went up the stairs slowly, carefully taking each individual step. Eventually, she reached the third floor, where our classroom was. Keeping her in my field of vision from half a step behind, I reached out to my own scarf. I slid it off, then rotated my neck to relieve the stiffness.

It would be best to actually tell Yuigahama how things had gotten to this point. Even if she didn’t fully understand, I wanted her to know. “Well, about that… I’m not helping. We’re actually up against each other.”

“Uh-huh… Huh? Pardon?” Yuigahama had been walking steadily up until this point, but she came to a sudden stop and whirled around with her mouth hanging open. Ah, she was communicating with her whole body, *I don’t get it…*

That big of a reaction was actually refreshing. It made it more worthwhile to act defiant about this. “No, not like that… Like, she’s kinda being *really* stubborn about this, okay? It’s impossible to work together. So I’ve decided to compete against her. That’s the only way I can be involved.”

“…Uh…huh.” Yuigahama didn’t seem convinced, but her slightly confused expression turned to one of utter bafflement as she gradually pieced together what had happened. “Like…you’re really dumb sometimes, Hikki…”

“No, I’m really smart sometimes.”

Yuigahama stood there, stunned, and I strode past her as jauntily as I could, ridiculously arrogant in every way.

Seeing that, Yuigahama gave a tiny *murrg* but then, after a bit of a struggle, said, “Did you have a real conversation?”

“…Would that resolve it?” I said, implicitly adding, *This is me and Yukinoshita.*

Yuigahama picked up on the unsaid part and slumped. “Guess not…”

Amazing as usual, Yuigahama, Amazingahama for short. She understands very well indeed.

“Nope. So the only option is to make it a competition. Anyway, first we get the prom over with. We won’t get anywhere otherwise. As for the club and stuff…well, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” I said, even as I felt doubts.

Once the prom was over, what then? What did I mean to do with the nonfunctional framework called the Service Club? What did I think about our future?

But we had to put an end to this, or we wouldn't make any progress at all. For now, we'd managed to reach the starting point. Next, I just had to think about how to actualize this unreasonably difficult task.

Walking as I thought about it, we arrived at the classroom.

Yuigahama was trudging along, but she stopped right before entering, at the door. When I turned to her, wondering what was up, she seemed to be thinking about something, her eyes drawing downward.

Eventually, she lifted her face, fixing me with a serious expression. "…I can't help with that, too?" She squeezed her backpack strap tight, looking straight at me with an unwavering gaze. I could see worry in her large eyes, and her lips pulled tight.

Once I'd seen that expression, there was no way I could refuse her.

Interlude…

I don't get it.

I was thinking the whole time I was sitting at my desk—when I was talking with everyone, when the bell rang, and when the class began.

I really was confused. I'd thought this was for the best, that this could finally come to a solid end. That's why I'd cried. But I really don't get it.

But of course we're here. This is what he's like. This is what they're like. They're smart, but they are so, so stupid. They've always done this stuff, so they don't understand any other way. They need to have reasons like opposition or a competition, or they can't get close.

So it was an excuse—that whoever wins the competition, they'll do whatever the other says.

I think she's already settled on a wish. It's the same as mine, but the opposite. They're similar, but completely different.

There's only one way to grant her wish—but it's the one thing we can't do.

It doesn't matter how—we absolutely have to be involved, or none of this will work.

…So I say.

I'm sure this is an excuse, too.

I hadn't written down the notes from the blackboard, but it was already getting erased, and the textbook was turned to the next page. I couldn't hear any chatting voices. A sigh mingled with the squeak of chalk and the skritch of mechanical pencils.

I glanced over to the place where I was always looking.

He was leaning his cheek on his hand, eyes closed, nimbly spinning his pen with his right hand, head tilted just slightly downward to pretend like he was looking at the textbook, just in case… But honestly, this was better than usual. When it's really

bad, it's like he's completely asleep, flopped over on his desk. He's always like that during breaks and stuff.

I was always watching.

Even back when we were in different classes, even when he never noticed, even when he didn't know me—and since we got to know each other and slowly became friends, probably always.

So for just a little longer…I'll make excuses. I'll lie.

And do my best to put on a smile.

I really am dishonest.

4

Once again, **Hachiman Hikigaya** makes a speech.

The classroom was filled with the after-school bustle.

During class, I'd done a little sleeping and a little not-sleeping while thinking about things, but I put that on pause for the moment as I got my stuff together to go home. I put on my coat, wrapped my scarf around my neck, slung my empty bag over my shoulder, and rose to my feet.

My destination was the back of the classroom, the corner by the windows. Even after the bell had rung and my classmates had gone their own ways, there were still people hanging around there.

The queen with golden sausage curls enthroned in their center folded her long legs, sproinging her hair as her nails tap-tapped on her phone. Standing with her was Ebina, who was already ready to go home, and Yuigahama, whose back was turned to me. Then there was Hayama and the three stooges standing with the window behind them, all ready to go to their club.

The feeling of freedom at the end of the school day still hung around them as they chatted with each other. Now, I just had to cut in.

To be honest, going over to them was seriously exhausting. Even just approaching them took a lot of guts, and initiating conversation was almost too much for me.

But I was the one getting help from Yuigahama here. It was only manners for me to go talk to her. Waiting at my desk to have her come to me would be pretty pathetic. Specifically, about as pathetic as a light-novel author who deliberately goes out into the studio lobby during a break in the dubbing to wait for the voice actresses to come talk to him.

I was already quite pathetic, but I do have some pride. So now, I would screw up my courage to press forward. Slowly, slowly, like a *kyogen* performer…slowly, slowly, slowly…I slipped my way toward their group. It seemed this tactic worked, as there was no

indication Miura or the others took notice of me while discussing their plans to go hang out later or whatnot. With this level of slowliness, maybe I'll be able to fire off a midair Motoya chop, soon enough.

Approaching a millimeter at a time, once I'd sneaked right up behind Yuigahama, I quietly cleared my throat and said, "…I'm about to get going—what about you?"

Yuigahama spun around. "Oh, yeah. I'm coming, I'm coming," she said easily. Then she swung her backpack onto her shoulder and waved at Miura and Ebina. "See you guys."

"Mmm," Miura answered lazily, while Ebina smiled brightly and waved back.

"Byeee."

Two of the three stooges exchanged looks of surprise, while the remaining one went, "Huh? Uhhh, huh?!" doing a double and triple take at us. Tobe really is obnoxious.

Then Hayama glanced over at us with a weirdly warm smile.

The heck? This is wildly embarrassing and wildly painful, and I'm definitely gonna want to die later…

Even once I'd turned away, I could feel their lukewarm gazes as I rushed out of the classroom. I didn't forget to yank my scarf up to hide my cheeks.

Exiting into the hallway, once I'd finally slowed from my speed walking, Yuigahama came up just as quickly and let me have it fast and hard. "Like, what the heck was that?! Just talk to me normally! You were so slow and sneaky! Like seriously, it actually freaked me out."

"Uh, I can't do that… It's just really nerve-racking, okay…?" I'd used up all my energy on going to talk to her before, so it came out really exhausted.

Yuigahama huffed at me, but it immediately turned into a lighthearted smile like, *Oh, you're hopeless.*

Walking down the hallway side by side, we came to a corner. Go left, and you'd have the special-use building; go right, and you'd head down the stairs.

"So now what?" Yuigahama asked.

"Yeah… Well, first we have to decide what we're going to do… For now, how about we go someplace we can talk?"

"Okay. Like Saize?"

"Well, yeah."

Though the Service Club room would have been an option, neither of us suggested that. I doubt we had forgotten it, but we were deliberately excluding it. I don't think our reasons were exactly the same, but I'm sure they were similar.

She was there, and that was where it had first been established.

So we probably wouldn't go to that clubroom again.

X X X

We walked away from the school for a while, me pushing my bike.

We went to the Saize at the station, and as soon as we were shown to our seats, we ordered drink bar tickets for the both of us. Getting our drinks right away, we slurped at them through straws as we made ourselves comfortable. Normally, we would have ordered a Milan-style pilaf or the spicy chicken or the pepperoncino spaghetti, but we hadn't come to eat that day. Drinks would be fine, for now.

Or so I was thinking, when Yuigahama immediately opened up the menu. "I'm kinda hungry! What about you? What'll you get?" Sitting opposite me at the four-seat booth, she placed the menu in the middle as she leaned forward, flipping through it.

Every time you do that, I see little flashes of things, you know, so can you be careful? And also, I did have lunch…, I was thinking when something suddenly occurred to me. "Oh yeah, what did you do for lunch?"

The moment I asked that, Yuigahama's hands thumbing through the menu froze. Then she scooted back and flattened herself against the backrest. "…I am eating right, okay? …What about it?" she said super quietly, turning her reddened face aside as she sneakily twisted around. I could tell she was trying to turn her body to make herself look subtly thinner or something… But doing that actually emphasizes another nice part of her figure!

Clearing my throat with a *gfum, gfum*, I looked slightly away. "Oh, that's not what I mean? You've been eating in the clubroom at lunch, right? I was just wondering about how it is now."

"Oh, gotcha…" Yuigahama sighed in relief, facing the front again. After a thoughtful pause, she slowly began to say, "Yukinon said she'll be in the student council room for a while, eating and working. So I guess I've been with Yumiko and Hina lately… And

that's more or less the story after school, too."

"Oh," I replied briefly, and Yuigahama nodded with a lonely smile, stirring the straw around her glass.

Yuigahama and Yukinoshita had spent most of their time during lunch and after school together. And before Yukinoshita had gone back to her parents' house, I think Yuigahama had gone over to her apartment a lot, too, so they would have been together often on evenings and weekends. But since this whole prom thing had hit the fan, Yukinoshita was focusing all her effort on that, which didn't leave many opportunities for Yuigahama.

What would happen in the future? Once the prom was over and we'd moved on to the next year, would they be able to spend time together in the same way?

"…Well, first we have to get the prom over with," I said, cutting off those thoughts as I drank down my iced coffee. I'd made sure to put milk and liquid syrup in, but it was still unpleasantly bitter.

Yuigahama's eyes dropped to the glass cupped in her hands, and she brought the straw to her lips. Taking a gulp, she gave me a firm nod. "What're you going to do now?"

When I raised my head again, the usual cheer had returned to Yuigahama's expression. It helped me recall the way I normally acted. I tugged aggressively at the hair at the back of my head and lazily started talking about my thoughts from the night before. "Well, I considered a bunch of stuff, but I think if we try to just make the prom happen, our odds are pretty bad. Once a plan's been shot down once, it's just not going to work again."

We'd had many opportunities to present plans over the course of the year, including the cultural festival, the athletic festival, the Christmas event, and such, but even with what we'd learned from those experiences, this prom thing was a headache and a half.

With the previous events we'd been involved with, we'd discussed them on the assumption that they'd actually be held, in one way or another. But this time, what the parents wanted was not a revision of the prom, but its cancellation. We could revamp the plan all we wanted, but so long as the fundamental elements didn't change, their reaction wouldn't, either.

And the biggest roadblock was the fact that the proposal had already been rejected once and branded a failure. That stigma would follow it around in the future, and even if we submitted

plans for modifications, they wouldn't necessarily get a fair shake. And the negative impression of the prom as an event, combined with the fact that the proposal had already been turned down once, would bias the parents. So any revisions would just be treating the symptoms of the problem instead of overturning the decision itself.

Gathering my thoughts as I chewed on my straw, I told her my conclusion. "…So we have to push a new *bias*," I said, using the English term.

Yuigahama, who'd been listening blankly with her mouth hanging open, muttered vacantly, "*Bai-asu*… Oh! Vibes?"

"No." *Why are you so confident you got it right? It's weird. You're way off. You don't say you're hanging out and* biasing.

Perhaps it would be best to explain this, just in case.

"*Bias* means, like…a leaning, or a prejudice…or a stereotype that makes it hard to see something a different way, I suppose. I dunno."

"Hmm?" Yuigahama tilted her head.

She really doesn't get it, does she…? Well, it wasn't like I was super informed either, so it was fine if she just got a rough idea. The part I wanted to make sure she understood was what came after. "In other words, we need to push them toward a new bias. So we'll make a new, separate prom proposal, different from the one Yukinoshita and the others are planning," I said.

Yuigahama gave me a blank look. But it gradually turned skeptical. "…Why?"

"Right now, they see the prom existing at all as a bad thing. But if something worse shows up, what then? Then they'll start being like, *Well, the prom before was better*."

"I…see…?" Yuigahama replied, but she didn't get it at all.

Hmm, she's totally saying that as a question… How should I explain this…? I was thinking, when the Saize menu caught my eye. Flipping through it, I opened up the last page. It had the dessert menu. Pointing at it, I looked Yuigahama right in the eye. "…If carbs make you fat, you don't want to eat ice cream or sweets, right?"

"Y-yeah? Where's this coming from…?" Yuigahama twisted around again, kind of pulling away.

"But if a new candidate pops up, a half-calorie ice cream, then you'd feel like you could eat it, right?"

"Yeah, I could eat two…"

“That’s not what I mean…but, well, sure.”

Yuigahama’s eyes were on the menu pictures, so I cleared my throat to return to the conversation at hand. “We’ll come up with another prom plan, a sort of foil. Once it’s a choice between two options, we make the parents feel like they have to choose one. The strategy is to put forth a trash plan, a trash proposal, to get the real plan through.”

The way things stood now, the only options were to accept the prom A plan Yukinoshita and company had come up with or to decline it. But if we proposed a separate prom B plan, then psychologically, the ones making the choice would believe they had to choose between plan A or plan B. Doing this would eliminate the original option of rejecting the plan.

“Ohhh…I get it,” said Yuigahama. “You mean the prom Yukinon and Iroha-chan are working on is the half calorie, huh?” She nodded, then paused, and her head jerked up. “Wait, but weren’t they saying the prom was out to begin with? What if they say no to both?” she said, and I smacked myself in the forehead.

“Well…”

Yuigahama had indeed pointed out the weak point of this plan. Her head may be full of rocks, but she had some smarts deep down in there, too.

This method is most efficient primarily when guiding someone who can’t make up their mind. In this situation, since they’d already given us an answer once already, just forcing a selection between these two options alone wouldn’t be that effective.

So while this was added after the fact, we had to put forth a new precondition.

“…But that’s probably okay,” I said, and Yuigahama cocked her head.

“The school doesn’t really want to cancel the prom entirely, either,” I continued. “If they did, they would have canceled it directly. They have a track record of respecting the students’ autonomy, and they even celebrate it as a school tradition.”

“Yeah, true… We’ve done a lot of stuff before, too…” Yuigahama was digesting that, though she sounded kind of skeptical.

It was true that the stuff about school tradition was a bit weak to base this gamble on. But like Yuigahama said, if you considered examples like the Christmas event, we’d done quite a lot. The

school hadn't said no to that, so it was clear they did mean to allow the students a certain degree of freedom. Additionally, Miss Hiratsuka herself had told us the school administration hadn't really taken issue with the prom at first.

"The school will be thinking about appearances, too. Completely crushing the plan now would be bad for their reputation. So the odds are high that they'll say, *Well, the more appropriate plan, then*, and take its side. We'll count on Miss Hiratsuka for that," I said.

"Right!" Yuigahama nodded with some relief.

Miss Hiratsuka actually had won us the pledge of an implicit cancellation rather than an explicit one. So then if we turned this into a situation where there was a choice between two options, she should snag us a certain right to speak, some discretionary power in the school's decision and negotiation with the parents. Meaning we could be somewhat optimistic about how the school administration would handle it.

The issue was the parents, the party being negotiated with. That part did put a certain weight on me, and I found myself chewing at the straw between my lips. "And then about the parents…well, the loud ones anyway… If we can show them we've made compromises, while also helping them to feel like they made the decision themselves, then they'll be satisfied and back off…"

A lot of the time, when people come in with loud complaints, grievances, and gripes, it's not really about the complaint; their goal is just to beat someone else down. So if we made them think, I *made the decision*, I *changed it*, I *had them apologize*, it was quite plausible that would be enough for them.

But frankly, I had no definite proof of this.

This time, I was the one cocking my head. "…That's what I think, but I dunno." I sighed, thinking about Yukinoshita's mother.

The one to come to the school had been Yukinoshita's mother, rather than the parents with actual concerns about the prom, and that seemed like a single ray of hope. It was fair to assume she was just the messenger and that her statement was tied to her position as one of the trustees of the parents' association, or her title as the wife of a local man of influence. At the very least, that was the impression I'd gotten from the way she'd talked initially.

But perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised by how that pseudoargument turned out, given she was the mother of the

Yukinoshita sisters. As it went on, she'd seemed to get excited about it, too, and tangled us up in her logic. I think she may like arguing quite a lot. She'd jumped on Isshiki when she'd tried to counter her, after all. Or maybe that's not quite right. Maybe what she really likes is to argue someone down and make them submit.

If that was what it was, I couldn't be quite sure if Yukinoshita's mother would simply withdraw.

So then we'll need one more move, something else to deal with Mamanoshita, huh…? Aw man, I don't wanna get involved in this—Mamanon's way too scary for me…

Plus, at this stage, I didn't have anything else.

"Well, I guess this means the only option is to suggest the possibility we'll hold the event anyway while we have them select in a more controllable direction," I concluded, spitting out my chewed-up, soggy straw.

"Huhhh," said Yuigahama, impressed. "That's kinda amazing… You should have a job like that! Something like handling complaints! You're really suited to it!" Her eyes sparkled.

There was literally nothing pleasant about that statement. My expression immediately turned to one of legitimate disgust. "Please God no… I'm not cut out for it. And I'm not gonna get a job."

But Yuigahama's bright smile didn't change. She giggled, apparently pleased.

No, really, I'm not cut out for it, okay? I mean, if you dealt with complaints like this as an employee of a regular company, it would obviously cause absolute disaster with the accounts. This was just within the unique environment of the school, and I was a freelancer of sorts, so it might just barely work. Properly speaking, complaints should always be managed in the same way.

Yes, tossing it all off on the higher-ups! Or turning it over to a call center to leave it to the pros.

"Anyway, our job hasn't even started yet. The real bad part starts here." I sighed deeply.

"So you mean…" Yuigahama folded her arms with a *hmm*, angling herself toward me.

Leaning on my folded hands in the Gendo pose, I continued with the utmost gravity. "We have to do this fake proposal right. And it has to be realistic and pretty legit. If not, we won't even get to the choice stage."

"I—I see…" Yuigahama drew back a bit.

I leaned further forward, chasing her down. “So we don’t have enough time or personnel, at all. And incidentally, we never had any money.”

“So, uh, you might as well ask, What do we have…?” Yuigahama drew back even more, smiling awkwardly.

I gave her a flippant smirk. “And so what I present to you is this. People with more than enough time and who will work for you even without pay…the students at our school. And if you act now, unlimited use is functionally free.”

“That’s totally exploitation!” Yuigahama held her head in her hands with a tearful *waaa!*

But with things as they were now, we had to completely burn out the professional personnel from our school, or this would never happen. This is the Soubu High School workplace reform, the Professional High System…

Yuigahama’s shoulders slumped, but then she peeked up at me from under her bangs. “But, like, would anyone even bother helping with a plan like that, if it’ll never get passed?”

“Yeah, that’s the issue…,” I said, looking up at the ceiling.

She was indubitably correct. Working for the ideal prom was one thing, but it was doubtful anyone would want to be the bait-doomed-to-lose-Yamcha of their own accord. They would have to be idiots, extremely naive simpletons, or high-end twisted people.

There was nothing for it but to give up on finding people in the standard way. So then our options were limited. “I guess we’ll try some good old-fashioned cajoling to gather as many as possible… If there’s no financial burden and we just brace for a lot of apologizing at the end, then maybe…” I folded my arms; if all I had to do was some bowing on the floor afterward, that’d be great.

That was when I heard a smothered sigh and looked over to see Yuigahama biting her lip, head hanging. Even without words, what she wanted to say got across well enough to make my chest hurt.

I shouldn’t have said something like that so flippantly. I’ve made so many mistakes like that.

Letting out a deep breath, I admonished myself. “…Uh, I guess I’ll try talking to people. I don’t think they’ll understand, but I’ll go after the ones who seem like they’re most likely to agree.”

“Yeah.” With a little nod, Yuigahama cracked a smile back at me.

I’d already gone wrong, but I at least didn’t want to make any

more mistakes.

I had to find a different way of doing things. I had to stop being so careless.

X X X

After contacting all the people we could think of, we relaxed for a while. Out the window of Saize, you could see dusk approaching. Evening rush hour was still a ways away, but there were more people coming and going in front of the station.

The people we'd contacted replied, saying they'd meet us, so we were waiting for their arrival. In the meantime, we'd broken into an early-ish dinnertime.

Yuigahama was having a battle with the pizza in front of her, and with each aggressive *fngh!* came dangerous sounds. She didn't seem accustomed to handling a pizza cutter with teeth, as the cutter and plate were colliding to create some concerning screeching and grinding.

Eventually, she finally got it cut up, letting out a "Phew" as she set a now sad-looking slice of pizza on a plate to offer it to me. "Here, Hikki."

"Mm, thanks." At this stage, it wasn't anything you could call pizza shaped. But she was sharing, so how could I complain? Saize pizza is delicious, no matter how you eat it.

"Tabasco?" she asked.

"Ah, yeah, yeah. Thanks." I took the hot sauce she placed in the middle of the table and shook it over my plate a few times, then munched on the pizza, now even more delicious.

Meanwhile, the pilaf and salad I'd also ordered came over. After this, we had some meat dishes coming, too. This was going to be a more luxurious meal than I'd expected. *I have to message Komachi to tell her I don't need dinner…*

While I was tapping away on my phone, Yuigahama clicked a fork and spoon together like tongs. "Want salad?"

"Just a bit. Take out the tomatoes. Oh, and you can have all the shrimp. I'll be full on the meat."

"Really?! Yay! Wait, but eat your tomatoes. It's not good to be a picky eater."

"No, no, no. Tomatoes are so bleah. They're all mushy. I really

can't stand them."

"Huhhh? But that's what's nice about them." She must have been used to portioning out salads, as she served it cleanly, with brisk grabs. I accepted it with a grateful nod.

Hnnngh… The gloopy part of the tomatoes is stuck to the lettuce… Squeezing my eyes tight, I swallowed it down mostly without chewing. *Phew, no more tomato bits…* I breathed a sigh of relief and opened my eyes to see Yuigahama, leaning on her palm and watching me with amusement.

"You're kinda like a little kid," she said teasingly with a *tee-hee*, then broke into a more mature smile. I knew she was the same age as me, but when she got into big sister mode, my eyes restlessly wandered all over the place. And with each shift of my gaze, her large, dewy, brilliant eyes that shone like angels' halos, the indent of her collarbone, the fingers that swept her hair back over her ears, her broadly smiling glossy lips, the graceful curves of her long eyelashes, and her pink, soft-looking cheeks caught in my field of vision, and all of it pulled at my attention.

"Even most adults hate tomatoes…" *Like Miss Hiratsuka…* I grumbled under my breath, dropping my gaze. It was just kind of embarrassing, and I couldn't look Yuigahama in the eye. I raised my head again and blew a long sigh. *Agh, isn't the heat up kind of high in this restaurant?*

And then, in the distance, I saw the shameless approach of a familiar large frame.

Trench coat, fingerless gloves, and glasses. That in itself shouldn't have felt off at this time of year, but the way he glanced around restlessly at the entrance made him exceptionally suspicious. That suspiciousness spoke most eloquently about who this was. This gentleman was none other than the man who had once dubbed himself the Master Swordsman General: Yoshiteru Zaimokuza.

When I raised a hand to catch his attention, Zaimokuza's expression broke into a beaming smile as he waved his arm back at me and lumbered over to us. *Why does this feel like I've tamed a wild bear…?*

Then Yuigahama, who'd turned around to look, stood from her seat with her bag and circled over to my side of the table. "Mm."

"Huh?"

Yuigahama stood next to me, holding her bag. Then she pouted.

“Move over.”

“Oh, okay…” I shifted backward, and she plopped herself down in the newly created space. *Why…? Is the possibility that Zaimokuza would sit beside her that unpleasant? Well, I wouldn’t want Zaimokuza coming up beside me, either, so I can understand that feeling… Still, isn’t this kind of close?! It’s making me nervous! I can’t focus on anything else!*

As I was surreptitiously gasping and panting, Zaimokuza cleared his throat dramatically with a *bafum, bafum* and thumped himself down right in front of me. “Hachiman, what is the meaning of this summons?” His utter predictability was actually reassuring.

Ah, how calming. I can breathe easy.

“I’ll talk about it once everyone’s here. For now, just spot the differences.” I picked out the kids’ section from the menu left on the seat and offered it to Zaimokuza. The illustrations on the front and back of this kids’ menu may seem the same at first glance, but there are in fact ten differences. These things have a reputation for keeping children quiet as they wait until the food comes.

“Mm! …This is hard, huh?” Zaimokuza accepted the menu and immediately set on the task.

He responds so well to such poor treatment. I like how easy this is…, I thought, smiling carelessly. “If we’re both single at seventy, let’s live at the same senior care facility.”

“What a novel way to propose! Mayhap we could even buy an apartment for singles. Let us watch anime and play board games every day,” Zaimokuza replied to me lazily, not even turning my way as he kept on intently searching for the differences.

Beside us, Yuigahama was seriously freaked out. “Yikes…”

My phone vibrated—probably the other person I’d contacted, Saika Totsuka. Then by the time I picked up the phone, he was already there.

“Hachiman,” he called in a slightly more subdued tone than usual. Maybe it was because we were in public.

When I turned around, Totsuka was coming our way, tennis bag slung over his shoulder. He was wearing his usual tracksuit, a peacoat to stay warm, and a fine-weave handwoven-style scarf with pom-poms on the ends around his neck. His clothing was kind of mismatched, like he’d rushed over after practice, and he was breathing hard, his cheeks flushed from the outside cold. The contrast was a nice change of pace, and before I knew it, a smile

was rising on my face as I lifted a hand in response.

Then my smile wrenched into a strange, tense shape.

Right behind Totsuka was a familiar bluish-black ponytail, accompanied by a black coat and tartan checkered scarf and liberally exposed long legs—and incongruously large shopping bags. Kawa-something's sharp, cool face was currently also displeased. She tilted her head in greeting, and I bobbed mine back in return.

Then I immediately whispered to Yuigahama beside me, "Didn't you say people who seemed like they'd get it?"

"You're the one who invited the snowflake!" Yuigahama griped back, quietly but entirely huffily. She hit where it hurts. I had no comeback.

"Yeah, well… That's, uh, hmm… Well, it's true he's not someone who gets it, generally…" …*But, um, listen, I hardly have anyone I can talk to at all, you know?*

Totsuka and Zaimokuza were the ones I'd called over, so obviously they fell into that category. I was acquainted with Kawasaki, so it was a fact that she was easier to talk to than others. If Miura or someone like that showed up one day, then I really wouldn't be able to say anything.

Totsuka stepped over to sit down daintily next to Zaimokuza. Kawasaki grabbed a nearby chair and sat, crossing her legs and leaning her chin on her hand in a sideways seat.

"Thanks, Saki, Sai-chan. Want something to eat?" Yuigahama offered the menu with a bright smile.

Bashfully, Totsuka said, "Ah, then…I just finished with my club, so I *am* hungry."

"I'm good… Just a drink," Kawasaki answered curtly. She probably had to go home to cook. Most likely, she'd stopped by here on the way to pick up Keika. I shouldn't take much of her time.

I'll get this discussion going once Totsuka gets comfy… Oh yes, it seems only Mr. Zaimokuza here hasn't quite been offered food, has he? I thought, glancing over to see his eyes were still locked on the kids' menu.

"Hmmg! I still have yet to find seven…"

He hasn't even found half. Three out of ten, huh?

X X X

I spent some time vacantly staring at Totsuka twirling forkfuls of pasta and putting them into his mouth, and then once we were all settled in, I decided to get started.

"First, sorry for calling you here so suddenly. Thanks for coming; it's appreciated." I gave a quick bob of a bow. Somehow expressly saying this was really embarrassing, and I couldn't bear to actually see how they'd react. So I kept my head down for a while.

When I did, a satisfied-sounding sigh, a gently agreeing *mm-hmm*, a mildly confused noise, and a happy *tee-hee* reached my ears. I basically got who was the source of which reaction, which completely defeated the point of having my head down.

I cleared my throat loudly, then began with a bit of melodramatic flair. "So I have some unfortunate news."

"Yes?" Zaimokuza straightened his posture to show he was listening, which was also unnecessary. Totsuka sat up nervously, while Kawasaki continued to lazily lean her cheek on her hand.

"Do you know what a prom is?" I asked.

"Nay, I do not. Therefore, I will now gain the knowledge." Zaimokuza took out his phone. Looking it up before asking someone else—this guy is a pretty competent *otaku*. If he'd asked me what it is, I would have lectured him to show dominance: *Just Google it. What do you think that box in front of you is for? You'll find out if you just do a little research, you know.*

I could tell when Zaimokuza had found the information by the loathing that appeared on his face. "Oh-ho… What is this fiendish event, existing merely to fulfill blue pill desires for recognition and transitory hedonism…? Once in university, those who glorify such events always become historical revisionists. *My high school had a prom*, they say, spreading the story around in special-event clubs, falsifying their pasts to play the part of cool partying socialites ever since high school…"

Zaimokuza slammed down his phone aggressively, and Totsuka peered over at it, impressed. Kawasaki didn't say anything like *Show meeee*, just glancing over out of the corner of her eye.

"That's the prom they're trying to have at our school… But we've decided to oppose it," I said.

Zaimokuza immediately clapped his knee. "So an anti-prom!"

"…Well, not quite, but not far off."

"I see! So you are anti-prom after all!"

Did he learn the term anti-prom *while looking up about proms just*

now…? Oh, that boy, whenever he learns a new word, he wants to use it everywhere…

As Zaimokuza was launching into a diatribe, I wound up heavily toning down my voice. “H-hmm… W-well, it would…mean that, I guess?”

“Huh?! Wait, what?!” Beside me, Yuigahama was shocked.

Shhh! Keep it down. You’re louder than both me and Zaimokuza. Also, don’t turn toward me; it makes stuff touch. Also stop grabbing my arm and shaking it.

As Yuigahama was swinging me around like, *What is the meaning of this?!* my eyes scanned the restaurant. Fortunately, it wasn’t crowded. There were empty seats here and there, and the four-seat booth right beside us was empty. *So first I have to explain to Yuigahama one-on-one, huh…?*

“G-give us a sec, okay? Could you wait for us a bit?” I took my leave from the others.

“Aye, doest as thou see fit.”

I understood that he’d given me permission (if nothing else), so I turned back to Yuigahama and made a pushing gesture with my hands in front of my chest. Yuigahama reluctantly stood from her seat. I climbed out after her, giving Totsuka and Kawasaki a nod in apology as I beckoned Yuigahama to sit down at a nearby table.

She gave me a dubious look as she sat down with me, then grabbed my shoulder and yanked me over to whisper, “What’s this about? Aren’t we doing a prom?”

“We are. That’s the plan… But it’s kinda hard to say that. And with Zaimokuza being Zaimokuza…it’s kind of a hassle to explain it in a way that won’t kill his motivation.”

I glanced over to see Zaimokuza orating sonorously to Totsuka about the atrocities of prom. Totsuka was skillfully making listening noises to indicate his attention, while Kawasaki was totally ignoring them and looking off in the other direction. The picture the three of them made together made me think of a snack bar at the edge of town.

Yuigahama’s eyebrows came together as she quietly chided me, “Huhhh? But you’ve gotta tell them.”

“I’m going to… Just, if something happens, please back me up. Please, thanks.” I put my hands together just a bit and bowed my head, and Yuigahama gave a reluctant sigh.

“…Agh. Guess I have to.” With a semi-exasperated smile,

Yuigahama stood from her seat, and I followed her back to the previous table.

Complaining for a while must have cooled Zaimokuza down somewhat, as he gave us a deeply interested *hermm?* upon our return.

I cleared my throat again. “Ummm, so now I have an unfortunate announcement.”

“Yes?” Zaimokuza straightened up once again.

“Well…we *are* in opposition, but we’re not necessarily anti-prom. We’re going to have a prom.”

“Pardon?” Zaimokuza was kind of tilting his head, but his expression was basically entirely serious. Totsuka’s and Kawasaki’s reactions were similar. Well, it was no surprise they would react that way. They didn’t know what was actually going on, after all.

I wasn’t sure what to say, so Yuigahama quickly jumped in to add, “Yukinon and Iroha-chan are planning a prom, but the parents and school have told them they have to *exercise self-restraint*. So we’re coming up with a different plan, kinda.”

“…Hmm.” Kawasaki didn’t sound interested, but the information about “self-restraint” must have been new to her, as her eyes widened a bit.

“The parents’ association rejected Yukinoshita and Isshiki’s proposal once already,” I explained. “Even if they revise it and submit a new one, chances are it’ll be shot down again. So we plan to put together a new prom proposal. If there are two, we can probably turn the discussion to being about doing one or the other.”

“Does Yukinoshita know about this?” Kawasaki put it curtly, but I could see she was concerned.

I shook my head. “No, she doesn’t… I mean, I haven’t told her. Sorry, but please keep this to yourselves. If people find out what we’re after, it’ll kill the whole thing,” I answered.

Kawasaki gave me a dubious look, like, *What?* Totsuka’s reaction was milder, but he seemed bewildered, too.

Meanwhile, Zaimokuza was tapping his fingers on the table, nodding *mm-hmm*. “Herm. A double bind…presenting them with a false premise, eh? The psychological technique of presenting multiple options and having them choose one to prevent them from rejecting both…”

“Yeah, I guess you could put it like that.” It wasn’t strictly speaking what Zaimokuza had described, since we didn’t have all

the conditions lined up to induce the parents' response, but that was the basic intent.

Totsuka had been nodding along, as if sorting out the information. "I see," he said softly. "So that's why you're opposing the prom."

"…Yeah. So I want you guys to help me think up a plan for the new prom…" The part after this would be really hard to say, and my lips were fighting me.

When I got stuck there, Totsuka straightened his posture, looking me right in the eyes. His usual softness had been replaced by a sort of dignity. "I'll hear you out, Hachiman. If I don't, I won't really understand what's going on again, and I kind of don't want that." Though his shyness crept up on him as he spoke, there was a determination in his tone.

I hadn't even considered Totsuka would feel that way, so I didn't know what to say. But I quickly realized—it was true that I never said anything to anyone. No…I'd give up on talking before I even started. I'd always just self-centeredly ended things my way. From his perspective, that must have seemed terribly dishonest.

Totsuka took a few deep breaths in and out, as if easing his tension, and then seemed to steel himself as he continued. "What do you want to do, Hachiman?" I couldn't quite grasp what he meant by that, so I gave him a questioning look in return.

Totsuka scratched his cheek as if he were a bit at a loss. "You didn't seem like you really wanted to do the prom, so I was a little worried… And it's kind of weird, not saying anything to Yukinoshita. So I wondered if maybe what you really wanted to do was something else."

"I mean, well…" I was about to reply with whatever came to mind, but Totsuka's serious gaze stopped me.

"Sorry, maybe it's hard to say with everyone here. But we want to understand you, too, Hachiman."

My words caught in my throat.

All the people sitting opposite me looked at me—straight on, sideways, in a glance, or awkwardly, as if they couldn't stand the tension.

As I searched the walls for some kind of response, Yuigahama gave me a look of concern. "Hikki…" Her hand plucked the cuff of my sleeve under the table. Feeling that warmth, I closed my eyes.

Yeah, I know. I have to say it this time.

I'd always wished for this kind of support. There was a bit of a different lineup here, but it was the same situation. Before, I'd hidden everything, borrowed reasons from others, and depended on their kindness.

But now, things were different. Even if it was pathetic and spineless, at the very least, I would not lie.

It didn't make any logical sense, and there wasn't necessarily any truth there, either, but they would be my own words. Nothing borrowed or temporary.

"Honestly, I don't care much about the prom itself… Yukinoshita is trying to do this on her own. So she doesn't want help from me." I slowly closed my eyes again. "But I still want to… make their prom happen."

Once I'd gotten it all out, my eyes met with Totsuka's. He was smiling wide. He gave me a big nod. Then finally, the thing that had been constricting my chest was released, and I let out a long sigh. "The proposal I'm trying to put together is basically a throwaway. A fake so we can get through what we really want. So if you're okay knowing it'll be for nothing, then help me out."

Bowing my head, I waited for their replies. The hand on my sleeve squeezed harder.

The silence was really only a moment. But after a barely audible exhalation, nobody quite spoke.

Eventually, there was a deeper sigh. Lifting my head, I saw Kawasaki looking apologetic.

"Sorry. I'm already helping Yukinoshita. I can't go half in on that. I have to do it." She'd moved her elbow from the table, and now her hands were in her lap, back straight in her seat. This upright version of her was enchanting.

"…Okay, I get that. Actually, it's great if you could help them. Since that one is the real plan. Thanks," I said.

Kawasaki jerked her face away. "I don't need to hear that from you…," she rushed to say, then added more quietly, "But good luck."

Totsuka, who'd been watching her with a pleasant smile, followed up with, "I have club activities, so I can't help with everything, either… But if you need some extra hands, tell me. I'll bring the whole tennis club to pitch in. I'm the captain, after all." He tapped his chest.

My expression relaxed. "Thanks. I'm counting on you." It wasn't

like we functionally had any more people to work, but it was honestly encouraging to have that insurance if needed. What helped most of all was having people I could rely on.

When I breathed a private sigh of relief, there was a tap-tap on my cuff. Even without words, that gesture whispered, *That's great.* I was too embarrassed to look at her, so I just gave her a little nod in reply.

It's not like we've made big progress. But now we can move forward, just a little…, I thought. Zaimokuza, who had yet to reply, was making a sound somewhere between a moan and a growl.

"Ferm…" He seemed lost in thought, and then suddenly he was on his feet. Inferring what he wanted, Kawasaki and Totsuka got up to let him out of the booth. Zaimokuza nodded his thanks at both of them, then cut through with a flattened hand to get past. When he was finally out in the aisle, he turned away from me and straightened his back sharply again.

"…Around this time, probably the Nishi-Chiba Lucky. Or no, maybe Numa Ace," Zaimokuza muttered, pulling out his phone.

Yuigahama and I exchanged dubious looks. When she asked *What's that mean?* with her eyes, I could only answer silently *I dunno* with a shake of my head. All that I got was that what he'd said were the names of arcades.

But I needed closure on this, so I said, "Um, Zaimokuza? Hello?"

Zaimokuza turned back around halfway, hand still in his pocket, with a cool smile on his face. "…Well, now we just do it."

It was a weirdly theatrical pose, but for some reason, it looked good on him, just this once, and my eyes widened. *Whoa, there. He's actually cool.*

"You have need of men, right? Make some time on the morrow. I'll send word," Zaimokuza said, then immediately strode off. I was so oddly affected I couldn't do anything but stare at first.

Hurriedly getting up, I called out after him. "Sorry, thanks."

Then Zaimokuza stopped. "Wait! And hope!"

The sight of him filled my vision, trench coat fluttering, arm thrust out, his voice loud and ringing.

Come on, man, seriously. Don't do that inside the restaurant… Okay, I'll admit it. That was kinda cool.

5

At some point unknown, the **ending credits** begin to roll.

The day after Zaimokuza's unusually cool declaration, the promised time finally came.

In the classroom after school, I glanced over to the back of the room, by the window. The usual group was there, with Miura in the middle. Of course Yuigahama was among them.

With a deep, deeeep sigh, I steeled myself and pushed out of my desk. I must have gone for it too hard, as the chair scraped ridiculously loud. Yuigahama noticed it and looked my way. Actually, everyone still in the classroom was looking at me.

I was so embarrassed, I wanted to go right past where they were by the back windows out into the sky, diving through the glass into the grand blue. The courtyard just about turned into an ocean of red…

But it seemed I hadn't humiliated myself for nothing, as Yuigahama heaved her bag onto her back and waved to Miura and Ebina before trotting over to me. "So let's get going?"

"Yeah…" *What a relief, for Yuigahama to come talk to me first… But that's embarrassing in another way! Hachiman is a shy and selfish seventeen!*

I was sure people were staring, so I swiftly left the classroom to shake off their eyes. Yuigahama came after me like a penguin, her indoor shoes smacking along.

I walked down the hallway, just half a step ahead of her, until eventually, we approached the same fork as the day before. Go right for the stairs, while left was the special-use building.

That was when Yuigahama tapped on my back. "What should we do today?"

"Oh, so I got a message from Zaimokuza…," I said, pulling out my phone to check the place he'd indicated, and Yuigahama leaned in to take a peek, hopping around to emphasize that she wanted to see.

Shoo, you're in the way and cute and annoying; stop jumping and hopping. I'm showing you now, hold on…, I thought as I held up the phone to show her. "Mm. Well, he says we're meeting with some additional personnel here."

"Huh." Yuigahama peered over my shoulder at my phone, blinking a few times. Then she cocked her head, giving me a questioning look. "…Is there anyone Snowflake could invite?" she asked.

I stared far away, out the window. The sky outside was blue and clear as far as the eye could see. In the azure sky, I had a vision of Zaimokuza doing a thumbs-up, and a weathered, manly smile befitting that image rose on my face. "Let's believe in him…"

"Was that supposed to be convincing…?" Yuigahama sounded very uneasy.

X X X

Before long, we were at the special-use building, as Zaimokuza had indicated.

Not on the fourth floor, where the Service Club room was, but on the second floor. Zaimokuza stood there in the corner imposingly, and when he noticed us, he waved. "Ohhh, over here," he beckoned, and we approached a certain classroom.

"Wait, this is…" Yuigahama's mouth dropped open as she stared at the door. I looked blankly at it, too, but then I suddenly remembered.

…I've come here before. I think it was, like, the games or pastimes something… Oh yeah, the Pastimer's Club, right? My memories about it are vague, but I do recall it being a workshop of fun, the time we played Millionaire there.

"Let us ask them." Zaimokuza knocked and then barged into the empty classroom without waiting for an answer. We snapped out of our daze, too, and rushed in after him.

Beyond the door were boxes, books, and packages piled high, rising in walls to make a maze. If anything, it made me think of a bibliomaniac's study crossed with an urban toy store.

"Heeey. This is the UG Club…right?" Yuigahama asked me, tug-tugging on my sleeve.

That reminded me. *Oh yeah, it was the United Gamers. I*

remember that.

As I was thinking this, Zaimokuza glided on ahead, disappearing off to where the books and boxes were piled up highest. Circling around them to follow him, we found two long tables, along with two boys.

When they saw us, they both pushed up their glasses. "Hi…"

"…It's been a long time."

Those familiar, slightly hip glasses… I failed to recall their names, and Zaimokuza gleefully started putting out folding chairs and setting tea and snacks on the table. After placing chairs for Yuigahama and me opposite the UG Club pair, he put a seat for himself on the UG Club side.

"Th-thanks…," Yuigahama said.

The UG Club guys and Zaimokuza all mumbled "You're welcome" as they gestured to a chair. Yuigahama quietly, almost reservedly, sat down, and I let my rear settle with a thud.

"Zaimokuza, the help you mentioned…was this?" I asked.

"Aye! Sir Hatano and Sir Sagami!" Pointing ahead with his jaw, Zaimokuza seemed quite pleased as he introduced them with an eager and desperate smile.

When the hell did you guys become friends…? Is this an arcade connection or what? Well, I don't even have a hair's worth of interest in Zaimokuza's friendships, so whatever. The issue here is which is Sagami, and which is Hatano… But even staring closely at them, I couldn't quite tell.

"Whoa, you were totally right, Master Swordsman." The one who I'm gonna call Hatano whispered to the one I'm gonna call Sagami.

"Seriously, I thought for sure there was no way…"

Given how they whispered secretively to each other, it seemed Zaimokuza had already informed them of the circumstances. That would make things faster.

"…All right, so we'll be having you two help us in opposing the prom, as well as planning a dummy prom in order to ensure the real one actually happens." Setting my elbows down heavily on the table, I emphasized my enthusiasm by leaning forward an inch. *So let's work hard together!*

The UG Club pair both just stared back at me. "This guy has got to be brain-dead." Hatano was exasperated.

Sagami, on the other hand, was pitying. "He wants to make

something so big just for that… Is he out of his mind…?"

And then Zaimokuza looked sincerely amused, puffing out his chest even more smugly. "Right? This is it! This is Hachiman Hikigaya! His methods are strangely inscrutable, as expected. He is a fool, a buffoon, a clowning knave! *Pffft, hnerk, hnerk!*"

Damn it… He's so annoying… I thought about kicking back my chair and just walking right out of there, but Yuigahama was sitting beside me, tugging on the sleeve of my jacket, so I couldn't.

"Hikki, you have to ask them properly…," she said, as if she were chiding a little kid, and I was really weak to that. But it was true that we were the ones requesting help. I had to be reasonable and ask them honestly.

With a sigh, I abandoned my complaints and irritation and bowed my head. "This is gonna sound bad, but we need your help as free, basically unlimited labor. Please think of yourselves as Olympic volunteers. Roll up your sleeves and help us out."

"That really does sound bad…"

"Even a politician would use a slightly better choice of words…"

Perhaps I'd been a bit too honest, as Hatano and Sagami both jerked back a bit.

"Ta-haa! This isn't good!" Yuigahama waved her hands wildly in a panic as she cut in. "S-sorry! Hikki's just like that! He just, y'know, kinda does that!" Her support wasn't really much support, but the guys weren't able to be harsh on Yuigahama, either, and only gave her vague, polite smiles.

And then immediately, the glasses conference began.

The glasses sitting in the middle whispered to the one beside him, "…What do we do?"

"Hmmg, I oppose it." For some reason, Zaimokuza answered instead.

Uhhh, you do…?

Meanwhile, the glasses who *had* been consulted raised a lazy hand. "Ummm, I don't want to do a prom or whatever anyway…," he said, and the other two glasses went up and down in nods.

Hmm, I get that. I do get that. Or so I would have liked to say, but this was the one time I couldn't back out.

Zaimokuza, of all people, *the* Zaimokuza, the Zaimokuza whose communication skills were even worse than mine, had reached out to his juniors, who had even made a fool out of him once. I couldn't

possibly snap this fragile connection. To reward Zaimokuza's noble sacrifice, I had to convince them somehow… If not, then I wouldn't be able to apologize to Zaimokuza on the other side. I would like him to rest in peace, at least.

So it was time to get serious and attempt to win them over with all my full-hearted sincerity.

Clearing my throat with a *gefum, gefum*, once I'd gathered their attention, I lowered my voice like it was a secret as I began, with some gravity, "…The truth is, just between us, they've demanded the prom organizers exercise self-restraint."

This must have been unexpected information, as unease stirred among all three of the glasses. *Zawa…zawa…* I don't know why even Zaimokuza was joining in on the *zawa zawa*-ing. *I explained this stuff to you yesterday.*

Well, whatever. Since I'm explaining things here, might as well set a little fire under this conversation. "On the other hand, that's *just* self-restraint. They *could* shut it down… In fact, there's about an eighty percent chance. In that case, it's possible we'll see something like what happened with the recent pre-prom."

"Uh, like we said, we can just not participate…" Sagami or Hatano still tried to argue.

But I only nodded at him to show sympathy while also raising a hand to say, *No, wait.* "Hold on. Consider—just consider—what not participating in the prom now would mean… It'll make it difficult to show your face at the coming-of-age ceremony or alumni events."

At the alumni events at age thirty, the participation rate of those who never came to the post-graduation ceremony gatherings or the coming-of-age ceremony is zero percent (we call this just not showing up). Also, if you foolishly screw up your courage to go to one of these, then generally about half of the attendees are married, and some of them have children in elementary school, and it's quite possible you will look back on your life and suffer unnecessarily (we call this blowing up). And the cost of going then will be about five thousand yen, and if you pay with a bill that features a portrait of Ichiyou Higuchi, it makes paying the bill easy (we call this a grown-up with *Growing Up*).

However, this didn't change the UG Club guys' reaction.

"Uh, it's not like we're going to those, either…"

That answer was about what I'd expected, so I immediately shot

back, “I used to think that way, too,” then stared into the distance to channel John Lennon. “Just imagine… It’s the morning of the coming-of-age ceremony… You’re wearing the brand-new suit your father bought you when you went shopping together for the first time in years. He got it for you just the other day, saying you’d need it for when you’re doing job interviews…”

“There he goes…,” Yuigahama said in exasperation, and I held up a hand to silence her.

I stroked the collar of my jacket for dramatic effect and put a little extra feeling into my speech. “And then your mom gives you a ten-thousand-yen bill and says, *You’re going drinking with everyone, right?* They’re both all teary-eyed, seeing their son all grown up, coming all the way to the front door to see you off. They’re like, *Have a great day, son…*” I narrated descriptively, adding a mom smile at the end with a little wave.

The guys suddenly seemed unwell.

“Murg, that hurts…,” Zaimokuza groaned.

As expected of Puberty Zaimokuza. He’s a lady-killer who makes women cry—the rare kind whose tear-inducing is limited to his mother. Apparently feeling guilty, he fell silent and looked down. Sagami and Hatano must have been thinking about their parents, too, as they groaned.

And so I chose this as my moment to strike. “And then an hour later,” I said passionately, “you crush that ten-thousand-yen bill in your hand and blow the money at the arcade and on binging ice cream at Kaikatsu Club, and once your stomach’s nice and cold, you keep drinking miso soup to kill time. You sneak back home late at night. The lights should have been off, but your mother has gone to the trouble to stay awake. She asks you if you had fun, and you answer, like, *W-well, it was normal.* Then your mother wipes her eyes and says, *…You’re all grown up already, Yoshiteru.*”

“Me?! This is me?! This was about me?!”

“Sorry, Master Swordsman…” Sagami and Hatano each clapped a hand on Zaimokuza’s shoulders in a show of consolation.

Watching that out of the corner of my eye, I declared dramatically, “We must educate ourselves in order to avoid this fate —on how to use our heads to get through it. You could say the prom is the perfect place for that training.” Once I was done, the guys all sighed, *ohhh*.

I smirked and continued. “But if the prom is too big and loud,

it'll be too high a hurdle. So this time around, we arrange an event that's the least of all evils… By having a prom that will be even slightly more comfortable for us, we build up our experience points."

When I was done, the glasses trio all stuck their foreheads together and began a glasses conference.

"I feel like he has a point."

"That bit about parents really hurt."

"Bet he'd do a good job, too."

"Yeah, and I hate it. If he just wasn't…like that…"

"Hey, could you lean back a bit, Master Swordsman? Eugh."

"That's looking way too close."

"So what do we do?"

"Yeah, huh…"

Yuigahama watched their whispered conversation and did not seem impressed. I could plainly see exhaustion on her face. *Sorry, Yuigahama…*

It seemed the glasses summit was coming to a close, as all three of them wound up thinking. Considering how they'd initially straight-up rejected the idea, it was fair to say my attempts to win them over had borne fruit.

"I wouldn't call this a reward, but we can promise that your opinions will be reflected in the event next year and onward, and that we'll arrange for a prom that can satisfy you. We'll work to make it possible. So give us a hand here." I added one more push at the end—not enough of an advantage to call a merit, but a suggestion that they would get something out of it. I gave them a bow, too.

Then, after some silence, one of them spoke with some reservation. "Um, is that okay? …Next year means when you guys will be graduating, right?"

"Yeah. So to reiterate, it'll be next year and after that."

I lifted my head to see one of the UG Club guys—guessing from the shape of his glasses, Sagami—give a sulky sigh. "…Then I'm on board."

"Whoa there, seriously?"

Zaimokuza and Hatano were both startled.

Sagami frowned. "Well, I'd like to eliminate any familial shame beforehand, I guess…"

"Hmm?" His reason was a bit surprising. I tilted my head,

seeking an explanation.

With some very obvious resentment, Sagami began muttering, "My big sister is the type who always butts in for these things. I could definitely see that happening next year… So then I'd like to intervene ahead of time, to eliminate that chance."

"Hmm…" As I listened to him, thoroughly examining his expression, it suddenly hit me. Now that I was thinking about it, they really did look alike.

Beside me, I heard a soft "Ah" from Yuigahama.

"Oh, Sagami—are you *her* little brother?" The moment I said that, Sagami's face twisted into an expression of the utmost distaste. *Oh, now I* really *see the resemblance. Hmm, that sucks, having someone like that as your sister. Yeah, yeah, I get that, I get that.*

"Shame to the family, huh?" I said. "I understand. My little sister is starting at this school next year, and when I think about the embarrassment she'll feel at seeing her pathetic brother, the humiliation is unbearable. Just imagining hurting my sister's little heart pains me…" My eyes were already tearing up.

"Oh, that's what you're worried about…" Yuigahama's shoulders slumped, semi-exasperated.

Well, Komachi's not someone you need to worry about, though! Back in middle school, she just committed to pretending she didn't know me! Even though we both have the same cowlick!

But what an unexpected moment for Minami Sagami to become useful. If not for her, then her little brother probably wouldn't have helped us. I am very thankful. Thankful for everything that has made our meeting possible!

So for the other glasses…, I thought, turning my attention to Hatano, who I could finally identify now.

He was taking off his glasses and polishing them with a cloth. "I honestly don't really care…but I don't like the idea of feeling less-than at graduation, or people pitying me because they made assumptions or whatever…so fine."

"Really?" *I'm kinda happy here.*

But Hatano narrowed his eyes at me. "But can you actually manage that? A prom that'll satisfy us, too, I mean."

Wow, this Hatano guy—the way he talks and that edge in his eye just now had exactly the right amount of rot. I've got rather high hopes for him.

I was impressed, in a way, and I decided to sort of play the role

of the upperclassman. “Yeah. That’s no problem. I’m sure they won’t have enough people to organize the prom anyway. Next year, you should just get together to handle it on your own. Like DIY. For that, just try groveling to Isshiki and licking her shoes,” I said with full confidence.

“Groveling…? That’s even too much for me,” said Zaimokuza.

“The shoe licking is the part that’s too much! And, like, you don’t have to go that far. I think Iroha-chan will listen to you…” Yuigahama, on the other hand, was unsurprisingly used to this. Though she was weirded out, she calmly returned to the conversation right away.

But Hatano and Sagami still aren’t fans of this, after all…, I was thinking, although it seemed it was something else that had put them off.

“Isshiki…”

“Iroha…” Both of them were muttering. They suddenly shared a look with each other, and then their heads were whipping over toward me, too. “Wait, you mean *that* Iroha Isshiki?”

“There aren’t any others, right?” The only Iroha Isshiki I knew was the student council president and soccer club manager, the Iroha Isshiki who was the number one cunning-cute junior. I doubted there would be another Irohasu at this school with the same first and last names.

“The worst…the very worst girl…” Hatano had his head in his hands, while Sagami was giving me an imploring look.

“Isn’t she a raging Stacey with a year-round pass to nighttime pool parties…? Like a party bimbo queen with a brand-name addiction and a boyfriend who’s the CEO of an IT company whose life revolves around Instagram engagement?”

Aw geez, that Irohasu—just what kind of girl do her classmates think she is, huh? We can’t have that. Even Yuigahama was smirking at this.

But as her senior, I should correct this for the sake of her honor. “Well, that’s mostly right, but those rumors are all lies. Her personality isn’t the greatest, but she’s a pretty good person.”

But my attempt to persuade them was to no avail, and Sagami and Hatano were both trembling. “But she treats us like garbage…”

“No, she won’t even look at us… She treats us like we’re not there…”

“She is a fearsome beast… A goblin, that creature is a little

goblin…" Even Zaimokuza was quivering, repeating himself almost deliriously. *No, no, she's a little* devil*, okay?*

"…All the more reason you have to do it. You guys just don't know her yet," I said with a shrug, and Yuigahama nodded. And then she smiled at me as if to say, *Yeah, tell them.*

So with only a hint of a smile on the corners of my lips, I puffed out my chest and spoke loud and clear to preach of her virtues, the Iroha Isshiki I knew. I hoped this would unravel the misunderstandings about her, even just a little.

"…All that horrible stuff about her? You'll find yourself getting into it, and then before long, you'll actually find it cute instead."

This brought remarks of high praise from the glasses trio: "Advanced tastes…" "He has a point." "I can get that." I high-fived my comrades who had touched upon this door to a new truth, one after another. We were on the road to having a toast: *Thinking of our firm bonds, happiness to you.*

Suddenly, something cold ran up my spine.

"You're soft on Iroha-chan, huh, Hikki?"

"Huh?"

My *youkai* radar cowlick was pinging, but I was too scared to face the source.

X X X

Despite all the various twists and turns, we succeeded in winning over the UG Club pair.

It was completely unknown just how much could be expected from them, but still, it was pretty big that we'd managed to acquire that unpaid labor. Their competence (or lack thereof) aside, if I could work them to the brink of death, they would surely be a great asset.

The problem was what came next.

First, we had to make a counterproposal and take it to the point of dispute. And so we began to put together our own offer to oppose Yukinoshita and the student council's plan.

"All right, and now to begin our planning meeting…," I said. "Ummm, the concept iiiis…one that's bigger and more attention-grabbing than the other prom proposal…"

The air around us was heavy, and nobody followed up my

remarks. The only sound was Yuigahama's quiet clapping, which echoed in vain before eventually fading out as well.

Though I'd been the one to get things started, I hadn't exactly come up with anything in particular. I was groping in the dark. I mean, aside from Yuigahama, no one here was even interested in a prom in the first place.

"For starters…does anyone have anything they want to do?" I asked, already thinking, *Nope…* As expected, zero hands went up…

Except for one Miss Gahama. "Oh! Oh! Ohhh!"

"…Yes, Miss Yuigahama?"

"A food stall! I think that's an idea!"

"Mm, yeah." I wrote the idea that had come up on the whiteboard without arguing it or rejecting it. The good old Tamanawa in my heart was telling me, *Did you know? When you're having a thought shower…* "Anything else…?"

"Ohhh, ohhh!" Instantly raising her hand was, of course, Yuigahama.

"……Yes, Miss Yuigahama?"

"Fireworks! They're fun to set off and fun to watch!"

"That's an idea." Committing myself to agreement and sympathy, I recorded her valued opinion on the whiteboard. The Orimoto in my heart was yelling, *Yeah, that's it!*

"Anything else…"

"Ohhh!"

"……Yuigahama."

"Like a campfire! That's kinda got memories, right?!"

"…You're just listing your memories of summer vacation, aren't you? Well, that's not a problem." Though I wrote that on the whiteboard just in case, this was kind of turning into a little kid's picture diary or something.

I gave Yuigahama a mildly weary look, and she combed at her bun and turned away. "…But when I'm trying to think about stuff I enjoyed and had fun with, that's what I'm winding up with," she mumbled.

That bashful blushiness was making me really embarrassed, too. As for what was embarrassing—the guys were all apparently ready to puke sugar. It was unbearable.

Clearing my throat with extra force, I moved proceedings along. "All right, so any other ideas, Hatano?"

"No, and I don't even want a prom in the first place, okay…?

What the hell are you forcing us to watch here, asshole?" Hatano grumbled under his breath.

I couldn't hear the last part there. Remember to speak from your diaphragm, okay?

"It's basically the sort of thing your sister would like, Sagami the younger," I said.

"I don't wanna think about it." Sagami the younger immediately hung his head and shut me out. I suspect I'd said something he didn't like.

Mm-hmm, I'm starting to tell them apart now. The one with the bad mouth and attitude is Hatano, and the one with the bad sister is young Sagami.

All right, the only one left is…, I thought, looking over to see Zaimokuza in the Gendo pose, muttering gravely, "Cosplay…is an idea."

"Oh, like Halloween? That'd be cool!" Yuigahama chirped.

"Heh." The strained smile on Zaimokuza's lips was somehow sorrowful.

Hmm, I think Zaimokuza and Yuigahama have different images of "cosplay," but that's actually not a bad idea. I added it to the white board, just in case.

Staring at our ideas vaguely, I was getting the feeling that something was off. "…This doesn't quite feel like it."

In addition to Yuigahama's various suggestions, I also added *Singing*, *A play*, and *Acclamation*, which had been in my Hachiman notepad, but none of these were game-winning hits. Instead, it just made me question whether we knew what a prom was about at all.

As I was internally pondering this, I heard Hatano and Sagami snickering derisively behind me. "We're just firing random counters at the other plan. What's the point?"

"If nobody's doing anything, maybe you should consider why."

"You have a point, and I hate it…" *Oh yeah, now I remember. These guys are the kind of* otaku *who basically know how to talk and like to get snarky.* But they weren't saying anything I hadn't vaguely realized myself, so I couldn't even argue. *Ngh…*

I spun the whiteboard around to the other side to get a clean slate, starting from scratch, and folded my arms to think over it again.

"Hey, Hikki." I turned around to see Yuigahama hesitantly raising her hand.

“Yes, Miss Yuigahama.”

“We honestly don’t know much about proms, and I don’t think we’ll be able to come up with anything better than what Yukinon and the others have been thinking.”

“…Well, true.”

“So, like, why don’t we make it a bigger event? Like, not just for us, but having a big party with everyone.” Yuigahama spread her arms wide, waving them all around in a simulacrum of a big party.

“…I see.” Yuigahama and I both sort of understood where the upper limit was, the capacity of how many we could mobilize from this school. Thus, we also knew it would be next to impossible to come up with the sort of prom plan that high school students could actualize.

Knowledge and common sense are really a nuisance: Once you understand something, you’ll wind up boxing yourself within that range. So our ideas were limited to extensions of events like cultural festivals, Christmas, Halloween, and our memories of summer vacation. Further, the original prom proposal Yukinoshita’s team had come up with was already pretty exciting. If you went even further than that, you’d wind up with something really out there.

“…We need a different approach,” I said.

When you’re running around and around in mental circles, it’s best to go back to the beginning.

In this case, we’d return the focus of attention to why we were putting together this plan in the first place. Going up against Yukinoshita had been one of the reasons, but not the goal. The goal was the actualization of the prom, and the elimination of those who would obstruct it.

In other words, the real enemy here was the parents.

I wrote *Anti-parents* on the whiteboard and rapped it with a knuckle. “This is it. We should think about how we can best be discovered by some of the parents, and then how we can get them to stop us.”

So instead of putting too much work into the content of the event, which more or less was already there, we’d shift gears to how we could easily up the sense of scale. And the simplest way to scale it up would be the power of numbers. Yuigahama’s suggestion of involving other schools was a good one.

After a bit of consideration, I wrote on the whiteboard, marker

squeaking, *Joint prom event with Chiba Kaihin area elementary/middle/high schools*.

Zaimokuza tilted his head with a *hmm*. "Can you do something like that?"

"Nope," I answered instantly.

"Huhhh…," Zaimokuza replied with confusion.

I wagged a finger at him and chuckled smugly. "At this point, whether we can do it isn't the issue. The important thing is making them *think* we're on course to do it."

The proposal couldn't be too outlandish. The crucial part was giving them a sense of its realism.

So we had to mix in the truth—or facts that seemed very much like the truth.

"For now, we make some 'inquiries' to nearby schools," I continued. "By showing them evidence of a fait accompli, we get the parents worried about it."

Whether we would make it happen was irrelevant. We'd just say we're "making inquiries" or "checking in" to keep from promising anything while still planting the idea. It's the same as with anime proposals. Even if they talk about it, that won't necessarily make it happen. There are shows out there that get announced but then are never made at all, you know! The anime industry truly is strewn with carnage.

"Assuming I'll tell Komachi soon enough, if there's anyone else…" And then it hit me. *I don't have anyone else I could call a connection…*

When I was folding my arms and *hmm*ing, Yuigahama waved a hand to make a suggestion. "How about Kaihin? We did lots of stuff together before, so maybe it'll be easy to talk to them."

"Conversing with them is so hard, though… But we do have a track record with them, so points for realism." It was extremely difficult to have a constructive discussion with Tamanawa, the president of their student council, but it wasn't like we were actually going to make this prom happen. We just had to pretend, and the fact that we'd had talks would be enough. Thinking about it that way, Tamanawa from Kaihin was the optimal choice, in a sense. He had a reputation for holding meetings that might appear smooth and legitimate but accomplished absolutely nothing.

"…What do we do about the rest? …Do we try talking to…our old middle schools?" Sagami said, clearly averse to the idea.

Hatano was openly sickened. “Yikes… No thank you…”

Zaimokuza, meanwhile, committed to feigning utter ignorance of the conversation. *Hmm, I understand the feeling! And so I will decide not to go.*

“There’s no need to actually go, for that stuff,” I said. “It’s enough for Kaihin to be the only school we actually engage with. For the rest, we just borrow their names.”

“Borrow their names? This stuff again…” Yuigahama’s gaze sharpened a bit.

I reworded myself with a wry smile. “I shouldn’t have put it like that… We just bring up their names as candidates for negotiation. Then we don’t go any further, but the possibility remains that we could approach the other schools to negotiate. It’s enough if we can make them assume that.”

The aim of this dummy prom was for the parents to see it as a problem, which would give us the opportunity for the pros and cons of the other prom to be weighed. When that happened, if we could give them the impression that the dummy side was out of control, while Yukinoshita’s side was the controllable one, they would be forced to give Yukinoshita’s plan their passive support.

As I was talking, Sagami’s expression turned serious. “So that information…is going online, then?”

“Yeah, I think that’ll be the best, in terms of cost efficiency.”

The prom had gotten complaints to begin with because of posting on social media. That was a guarantee that they were checking the Internet. For the dummy prom, there was no need for it to be widely known by the student body. If we could just ensure it was exposed to those particular fussy parents, it would actually mean less promotion labor than the real prom. Depending on how things went, we might have to think up a way to leak it to the parents, though… But whatever the case, it should be fine to cross that bridge when we came to it.

Right now, we had to hash out the basics.

“First, we make social media accounts and a website…and a group name,” I said as I wrote on the white board *Name suggestions ♡*. Yuigahama and the UG Club were all like, *What’s up with the heart…?*

Uh, no real reason…

Zaimokuza was the only one unfazed, rubbing his chin and tilting his head. “Hermm, so then like a production committee?”

“Yeah, something like that. We obviously can’t call ourselves the student council, too. We either think up something fake that sounds good, or we borrow the name of an organization like the student council and parasite off them…”

The quickest way to make this dummy prom seem real would be to get a thumbs-up from a trusted organization. Since we couldn’t operate as the student council, I wanted to find some organization with a similar appeal and pin them as our backing organization, or underwriter.

“Something besides the student council… Oh, like the club captains’ association,” Yuigahama said with a clap of her hands.

Hatano gave her a skeptical look. “Do they have some kind of authority?”

“Huh?” Yuigahama’s face went blank, and then she said innocently, “Uh, I dunno, but…but they seem kinda important.”

“…They do.” Hatano’s lips twitched, but he didn’t argue and dejectedly backed down.

Well done, Yuigahama, I thought as I watched the exchange and tried to follow that line of logic. “The captains’ association isn’t satisfied with how the prom is going, so they’re independently considering a joint send-off party among all the clubs… Blow up the scale, and it’s functionally a prom.”

“Ohhh, I didn’t know they were thinking about that.” Yuigahama seemed impressed as she reached out for the snacks.

“Oh, not like I know,” I replied nonchalantly.

“Huh?” Yuigahama clearly didn’t get it.

Meanwhile, there was someone else who apparently did. “Ohhh, that’s what he means by realism. This guy tells some wild lies…”

“Well, it’s logical, so it seems plausible as a motive.” Hatano and Sagami were half disturbed, half exasperated, and they were whispering to each other (“He’s got to be an idiot,” “There’s something wrong with his sense of ethics,” etc.).

Beside them, Zaimokuza was nodding. “Indeed…”

“This is ultimately just about what sort of setup will increase believability for the people who see it. I’ll run this by the captains’ association separately, so that won’t be a problem.”

The captains’ association was there so they could help each other and regulate all the clubs…or maybe not, I dunno, but that’s what I’d assume, from the name. If we could convince parents that

the captains' association would be the body holding the prom, that would be enough.

Writing out this big pack of lies on the board, I encouraged myself: *I'll do my best to wrap this up!*

"Well then, I think it'll work. Who's the most important person in the captains' association?" I asked, spinning around.

Yuigahama answered instantly. "Hayato."

"……Oh… I'll try talking to him tomorrow."

I'd kinda seen it coming… Actually, I might've heard something to that effect before, but the fact that I had to negotiate with Hayama was a real downer. *Hayama, huh…? Can't we have a coup d'état and put Totsuka in charge…?*

"Um, I get the concept for the plan, but the content is still really vague. We won't have a proposal to send off anywhere in the end, will we?" And just as my heart was getting heavy, Hatano hit me while I was down. Painful.

But we had to do what we had to do. "…The content is… Well, I'll whip up something on my end that looks legit. For now, could I have you guys make the website and social media accounts? Like something sleek."

"Aye, leave the social media to me! I'll copy-paste some of the foolish drivel from Twitter or Instagram!" Zaimokuza reacted instantly with aggressive enthusiasm.

Hatano glowered at him. "Whoa, he got the easy job."

"It's not a big deal… Please give us a bit of time for research," Sagami said, then immediately flicked on his tablet and began a discussion with Hatano.

"…If we're making it, then HTML?"

"Can't we just choose a template from a builder?"

"Let's look for some free software."

"But what do we do about the domain and sever?"

"I dunno. Let's just Google it."

Whoa, these guys might be better than I thought… Their first thought really is to search stuff themselves when they don't know. They're pretty highly conscious otaku. Hatano had a decent perspective on things, and Sagami was the conscientious type, unlike his older sister. *Perhaps he's learned from his older sibling's bad example? Ohhh, I feel that.*

Oh, no, I'm definitely not saying Zaimokuza's the useless one here, though. I think he'll try hard. In fact, I'm nothing but thankful…, I

thought as I regarded Zaimokuza, when it suddenly hit me. “Oh, I know. Zaimokuza, do you have a digital camera?”

“That I do. I thought it would be cool for me to have one, so I bought one in the past.”

I get that. You think a photography hobby would be so cool and dream about buying a camera, but then when you do, you never actually touch it and use your phone for everything!

“Bring it tomorrow,” I said. “It’ll be helpful to have a real camera when we’re producing material for the website.”

“So be it. You could also read the introductory book I bought. It’s like new!”

I get that, too. You buy how-to books, then you never read them…

Well, if I was using it for photography, then I’d give it a look just for reference. I clapped a hand on Zaimokuza’s shoulder.

Having assigned work to the three of them, I was starting to think of what my job would be when Yuigahama jabbed at my shoulder. “What about me?”

“You…can be the art director.”

“That’s kinda cool!”

She was so delighted, it was kinda contagious. “Yeah, supervise them with your special sense of style. Give the site design a sparkly, froofy, brain-dead sort of feel.”

“Wagh! Wording!” Yuigahama whined, but after a bit of pouting, she got over it and tilted her head. “What are you gonna do, Hikki?”

“I’ll throw together a rough proposal and design for this thing. For now, I’ll dig up some material and make the written proposal to submit,” I said, quickly putting together my things. It was good that we’d requisitioned the UG Club room as our headquarters, but I didn’t have free access to a computer here, and it was inconvenient to do research.

I stood up, and beside me, Yuigahama got ready to go home, too. When I eyed her suspiciously, like, *Why is she trying to leave…?* she slung her backpack over her shoulder with a final heave and proudly chuckled at me.

“If you’re thinking up the proposal and the design, then you need to have an art director. Right?”

“…Yeah.” My expression relaxed, and I nodded.

I swept my gaze over the room. Zaimokuza was busy collecting

information from social media, while Sagami and Hatano were loudly talking over each other, discussing the direction for the work. *Hmm, yeah. I can leave it to them.*

"…Then we'll see you guys," I said quietly, with a sense of guilt about leaving before them.

"Thanks! See you tomorrow!" Yuigahama called, and we both left the clubroom.

When we came out into the hallway, Yuigahama, walking beside me, asked, "Where are we gonna work?"

"Where there's an environment for working… A net café, I guess."

"Can you watch DVDs there?"

"Yeah, you can borrow players. They've got Blu-rays, too. And all-you-can-eat ice cream," I said.

"Oh. Then let's go!" Yuigahama pattered off quickly, and I hurried after her to keep from falling behind.

X X X

After leaving the school, we first stopped by the video rental store at the station. As I hung around skimming the anime shelves, Yuigahama efficiently went to go rent the item she was after. Then we went straight to the net café. We managed the process fairly smoothly, at least up until that point.

However, we met an unexpected stumbling block.

"…What kind of seat do we get?" Yuigahama asked.

"Well, um, u-uh-huh…"

At the reception desk of the net café, we'd repeated this same exchange about three times already. The clerk at the counter kept smiling the whole time, but after about two minutes of this, unsurprisingly, their smile was starting to turn cold.

"Well, I'll be on the computer, so the reclining one…" I gently offered my opinion, pointing to the explanation on the seating chart, and Yuigahama nodded.

"Uh-huh. But if you're gonna be writing the proposal and thinking up site design, wouldn't it be nice to do it while watching movies?" The photo Yuigahama pointed to included not only a computer but also a TV. Being able to work while watching that *would* be convenient.

“But we kinda need Office on the computer…” You can’t go without writing software if you’re going to be typing something up. A simple text editor would be fine, but nothing beats stuff like Word or PowerPoint if you’re drafting a proposal.

Yuigahama’s shoulders slumped. “Ohhh.”

I breathed a quiet sigh of relief. And then, the saint at the reception desk, who had not complained once during this whole exchange, smiled brightly and said, “We also have pair seating that includes Office.”

Yuigahama thanked them with a smile for such incredible service. “Oh, really? Thank you very much… So?”

She was asking me directly, and I knew now this was checkmate. Resign.

“Th-then, the pair room…” My trembling finger indicated a room with seats on the floor.

With a smile that was almost warmer than the heating, the staff briskly put through our order and escorted us to the seats. The embarrassment was making me sweat buckets under my coat.

It wasn’t like I was against the pair seat or anything. It was just too much for me. I had no idea how I should behave in that small space.

Once we were actually in the four-meter-square booth, that didn’t change, and with my drink in hand, I struggled to figure out where to sit.

“I was poking around some prom-ish stuff, too, just in case.” Yuigahama, who went in first, set up the DVD she’d borrowed and clicked the Play button.

For my own part, I selected a position as far to the edge as possible to boot up the computer and start typing. While I was writing up the rough draft for the proposal, I watched the video playing out of the corner of my eye, and whenever I saw things I was curious about or seemed promising, I noted it.

When the show approached the prom scene, Yuigahama tapped on my shoulder to let me know. “Our school doesn’t have a building like this. It’s, like, a sort of dance hall? Oh, but the one we saw before, they did it outside.”

“Maybe it doesn’t have to be in any particular building. Or, like, if you’ve got multiple schools coming together or whatever, then would it be more realistic to have a location not specific to any one school?” I said, noting down the idea.

Yuigahama seemed impressed and nodded like *Ohhh, yeah*. "That makes sense. Oh, like Destiny Land or something!"

"We definitely don't have the budget."

"I know that, but…I just wanted to try saying it." Yuigahama pouted and turned away, bringing the hot chocolate in her hands to her lips.

It was kinda cute, and my hands paused over the keyboard as I let a smile slip. "Well, though it's true that is pretty Chiba."

"I feel like most people would say it's pretty Tokyo."

"It belongs to Chiba."

"So stubborn!" Yuigahama said, covering her mouth with her hand as she laughed.

We were talking at a quieter volume than usual, the place being what it was, and it lent the chat an air of intimacy despite the topic. The space was dim, with dividers around us, so we could see each other a bit better than usual.

Instead of a cushion, Yuigahama squeezed a whole balled-up blanket in her lap. "Hmm, so then Ryugujo Spa Hotel Mikazuki!"

"That's pretty damn Chiba. But not very prom."

"That's not true. I went a long time ago, with my family…," Yuigahama said, picking up her phone. She must have been looking for a photo, as she flicked with her fingers for a while before she seemed to eventually find it. With a *hup*, she slid out of her seat and came over to me.

"Here!" She was pointing to a selfie. The app showed Yuigahama wearing a T-shirt and doing a peace sign. In the background was a poolside at nighttime, with sparkling lasers and neon lights. And then, while unfortunately the picture was slightly cut off, I could also see Yuigaha-mama in a swimsuit, reclining in a poolside chair. Gaha-mama, so youthful… Great genes.

Oh, uh, that's not the important part. The pool, right. The focus here was the pool, with the super-fancy, glamorous setup that reminded me of a concert or something.

I focused on the pool in the background again. "The heck is this pool? This is racy… This is a night pool party… The kind where stuff happens…"

"Wha…? It's not racy!" Yuigahama blushed bright red and whacked my leg with the balled-up blanket. Then she swiped madly at her phone to immediately come up with a Ryugujo-related website to show me. "Look!"

The official site did indeed carry a wholesome vibe, and the word I'd use for it was more like *beautiful* or *dreamy*. "Well, that's more realistic, budget-wise… Wait, they don't just do this in summer?"

"Hmm, apparently." Yuigahama nodded, showing me her phone again.

Peering at it, I saw it said *365 days a year. Whoa, Ryugujo… Now I kinda want to go.*

"But it's kind of far. I want to take pictures, so nearby would be better," I said.

Remembering, I opened up the file for the proposal I'd started writing. Considering the website design, I wanted an impressive image in there somewhere, but selecting a location would take time, so I'd been putting it off.

Yuigahama considered the matter with a *hmm* that was interrupted by a yawn. "Photos, huh? …Oh, what about the beach?"

"A beach? Where?"

"The one right by the school."

"That's Tokyo Bay…" *That's not even, like, Chiba Bay…* A resort area or a nighttime photo of an industrial district were one thing, but there was nothing photogenic about the normal ocean in winter.

But Yuigahama didn't see it that way. She bumped my shoulder with hers grumpily, then explained slowly, like she was trying to make me get it. "That's fine. Or, like, it's good because it's that beach. You can see it from our school, right?"

"Yeah."

"So in the evenings, the sun always sets into the sea… It's so pretty. It makes you think of all the fun you had that day," she said dreamily, closing her eyes.

She didn't mention when or where, but regardless, I thought she had to be talking about that sunset. That room, filled with sun for the briefest moment, right before it disappeared into the distant ocean.

It was nothing at all special—just the ordinary view of the sunset that we'd seen so many times. It had become so common for us, I don't even remember what we said those times, and I've forgotten what kind of books I was reading then, but I can vaguely envision that idle time in the twilight.

"So…," she whispered, almost trailing off, and the weight I felt

against my shoulder became more definite. “I wish…those kinds of days could go on forever…” She murmured so quietly, I could barely hear her voice.

After enough time had passed that the words had melted into the air, I nodded. “…Yeah.”

Maybe that had been too long a pause to call this a conversation; I got no answer. Instead, I heard the peaceful breathing of slumber. There was a soft pressure on my shoulder.

The movie had already reached the climax.

The end credits would play soon. Even if I wanted to rewind, I'd only been half paying attention, so I didn't know where to go back to.

Should I keep watching until the end?

Or should I start over from the beginning?

Or should I keep pretending I hadn't been watching at all?

I didn't have the time to wonder, as the ending credits began to roll.

Interlude…

I was pretending to sleep.

I wished the movie would never be over.

I wished the end would never come.

The warmth on my cheek was way hotter than I'd thought it would be. His shoulder—a little stiff, doing its best not to move out of consideration for me—was bigger than I'd imagined.

He reached out with just his other hand for a bit of typing, but soon that stopped, too, and I heard a quiet sigh.

As he was pulling up the blanket that had been over my lap, his hand froze. It felt a little ticklish, and I almost made noise, so I covered it by making sleeping sounds. He slung the other blanket, the one he'd been using himself, over my shoulders.

The movie would be finished soon.

At the end, the long, long credits would roll by, and then I would have to pretend to wake up and tell another lie.

The whole time, I'd been pretending I didn't see, pretending I didn't know, pretending I didn't get it.

But I did.

It was going to end the same way, even if I did stuff like this.

But this was all I could do. All I could think of.

Just being together, having time we could spend together—if we had a place the three of us could be together, that was enough. I'd do what I could for that.

The truth is that I know it's unfair, I know it's an excuse, I know it's dishonest, everything.

But please let this time go on a bit longer.

I will end it properly.

I won't wish for that *what-if*.

If a tear slips free by accident, I'll make sure to stop it.

So please. Please just give me a little more time to cry here, where nobody's looking.

So please. Please make the lies I'm telling myself true somehow.

So please. Please, the both of you, bring this relationship to a conclusion.

So please.

Don't end it.

6

Privately, **Hayato Hayama** feels regret.

A fight with a deadline is always a serious battle—kill or be killed.

This is the reason people will desperately struggle to survive it, shorting themselves on sleep and pulling multiple all-nighters in a row, somehow and someway making it to the end and barely avoiding death by the skin of their teeth.

It gets you in various places—specifically speaking, the neck, shoulders, back, and stomach—all the parts of a human, body and mind. My cells are at work, so I don't have to be, right…?

Going all the way till morning, I somehow managed to put together a rough draft of the proposal and website design, then lugged myself to school and arrived right before class started. I spent most of the morning classes sleeping.

If I was throwing myself into work, if I was facedown on my desk, I wouldn't have to think about anything or see anything.

I wanted to occupy myself with this exhaustion a little more; the fatigue was a perfect opportunity to keep my head down. Once school was over, I'd be able to put a slightly better face on.

I spent the end-of-day homeroom like that, too, weaving in between sleep and wakefulness with my cheek leaning on my hand. While I was letting both body and mind slumber, school came to an end.

I thumped my bag, coat, and scarf down on my desk. Then I stretched my stiff shoulders and back until they cracked, and I scraped back my chair as I rose to my feet. Wiping the bleariness of my sleepless night from my eyes, I turned toward the spot I always did, the window side by the rear of the class.

Yuigahama noticed me. Wrapping up her chat with Miura and Ebina, she trotted over. "Going now?"

"Yeah," I replied hoarsely.

"Whoa." Yuigahama made a little noise. "Hikki, you look awful…"

“Actually…?”

Yuigahama pulled a hand mirror from her uniform pocket to show me my face. I could imagine a face like mine on a zombie moaning, *Uuugh, too bright… I’m melting…* I know I had rotten-fish eyes to begin with, but the lack of sleep had really bumped up the level of decay. There was also a red mark on my cheek from my hand.

“I’m gonna go wash my face…,” I said.

“Okay. Then I’ll be in the hallway.”

Leaving the classroom, I Zombie Land Chiba’d my way along to the washroom.

As I splashed cold water on my face, my head finally cleared. To finish up, I pretended to be an OL in her second year, smacking my cheeks and yelling, “You can do it!” for motivation.

When I came back to the classroom, Yuigahama was waiting there in front of the door, as promised.

“Sorry to make you wait,” I said, and she shook her head to say she hadn’t been waiting that long. Then she held out all my things —my bag and coat and stuff—that she’d been holding behind her.

“…Thanks,” I said as I accepted them. Yuigahama seemed glad about something, smiling before shaking her head again.

We chatted a bit on and off, on the way to the UG Club room, but my head really was still hazy with sleep. I hoped smothering my yawn would help get rid of it.

Yuigahama drooped. “Oh, so, like, sorry about yesterday… That’s why you didn’t get enough sleep, huh…?”

“No, it’s fine… Actually, your coming up with ideas helped me out.”

Yuigahama had repeatedly apologized for falling asleep in the net café, then gave me a bunch of ideas and design plans for the prom on the walk back. I doubt it had been an attempt to make up for it, though. Thanks to her help, I’d managed to whip up something resembling a proposal document and design rough over the course of the night, so it was a wash, barely making the BEP, about net zero. In short, we were square.

She didn’t have to feel bad about it. I mean, it was on me for openly yawning and making her worried. I concentrated on my eyebrows to form a nice, crisp expression. “…Besides, I’m not sleepy anymore, so it’s no problem,” I said.

Yuigahama stared at me for a second, then burst into laughter.

“What the heck, you look so funny!”

“I do…?” Now that kinda hurt, but oh well. We’d gotten over the awkwardness, so I went into the UG Club room.

As I cut my way through the same old jumble of the room, I heard voices.

“First, we transition the site with PHP, then do the database management. No, that’s not gonna happen. I don’t even know.”

“And then we spruce it up with Javascript and configure the site design with CSS… When’s the submission deadline for this?”

I could see Hatano and Sagami talking about something—I assumed the website design—but their expressions were full of despair. It seemed after their efforts to do independent research, they’d emerged overwhelmed by reality.

On the other hand, Zaimokuza was patrolling social media with a truly wicked smile on his face.

Wanting to greet them with some proper thanks and appreciation, I summoned my courage and called out a quiet “’Sup.” The guys responded with a chipper “Herm, greetings,” “Hey,” and “Hnn,” respectively… Well, this is what you get with greetings between guys!

Then Yuigahama cheerfully raised a hand in greeting as well. “Yahallo!”

The air in the clubroom froze.

“What does that mean…?”

“Whoa, she really is too much…”

…Well, that’s what you get, huh?! Still, if they kept getting rattled, we wouldn’t get anywhere.

“Don’t worry about it. We’ve got something more important to talk about.” I plopped down in a chair and cleared my throat. The guys managed to pull themselves into listening mode, sitting up straighter. Once they were ready, I began gravely, “Henceforth, greetings during all committee meetings will be standardized as *yahallo*. No ifs, ands, or buts.”

“He’s actually an idiot…”

“Something really is wrong with him…”

Hatano was legitimately exasperated, while Sagami was legitimately pitying.

“C-cut it out… You’re embarrassing me now, Hikki, so let’s stop…” Head hanging with her cheeks bright red, Yuigahama tugged at my sleeve in an attempt to stop me.

At that adorable little gesture, Sagami pushed his glasses up, while Hatano removed his glasses and pressed a finger between his eyes. I assume that means he was impressed.

"…No, *yahallo* is good."

"*Yahallo*'s…good…"

"Aye. Well then, once again…" Zaimokuza initiated it, and the yahallo chant began.

"Yahallo!"

"Stop," Yuigahama snapped, glaring tearfully.

The whole table fell silent, and once everyone was calmed down, I began the discussion. I had to, or Miss Gahama would be angry forever!

"Well, down to business." Pulling out the freshly baked website design rough from my bag, I handed it out to everyone and tapped at my copy. "For the website, we have a single image with text information over it, and then we embed social media. It doesn't have to be anything fancy—we're going for a minimalistic chic. I found some pages for reference, so do your best to just rip off the whole thing to structure the design. I'll get the photos later, so for now just stick in some placeholders, and we'll replace it after."

Hatano was going back and forth between the written documents and the sketch of the layout, amazed. "…Then what was all our effort for? You could just do a blog for this…," he whined.

"Uh, that made our job easier, so leave it. You'll get us more work." Sagami grabbed his arm, keeping him from complaining any further.

You get it, Sagami the younger. You have the makings of a great corporate slave. Actually, you guys are nuts for doing all that research in one day.

Perhaps because he had nothing to do with the website design, Zaimokuza was the one person here who seemed the most carefree. He flipped through the layout sketch concepts, then folded his arms with a *ferm*. "And how is the project proposal going?"

"This is it, basically… I made it specifically for Kaihin, so I don't think you'll understand it." I held out the documents, which Zaimokuza perused.

Then his expression turned puzzled, and he handed the papers to the side. Hatano took them, and his face twisted up just from looking at the cover. "…What the hell is this?" He dropped the papers on the table.

Sagami flipped through the proposal, too, and the more he read, the more disturbed he became. “This is like some shitty ad for a new condo tower crossed with a new release in the business section… Why does this have diagrams of a Johari window and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs…?”

I told you so… I eyed the proposal cover bitterly. The titles were in an extra-cool font: *Blockchain-style diversity inclusion prom night proposal: sunset beach overlooking the waterfront, a serendipitous experience in the ultimate translucent space*. No, I don’t know what any of it means, and I’m the one who wrote it.

It was a little embarrassing to expose this to the light of day, if I do say so myself. I cleared my throat with a *keff, keff*. “…Well, that part’s just for show. Honestly, so long as they go for it, it doesn’t really matter.”

“Falling for a trick like this, what kind of sucker is he…?”

No, no, Hatano. Tamanawa isn’t a crude fish. Don’t classify him with suckers and blowfish. He’s actually the biggest fish in his pond. When it comes to being pretentious, he is in fact a Supreme Being–the Overlord, if you will. This is what’s going to make him jump on it.

Hatano gave up fairly quickly on trying to read it, but Sagami the younger tenaciously kept studying the proposal documents.

Once he was finally done, he nodded. “The actual content seems fine, though.”

“Yeah!” Yuigahama said. I could tell she was glad.

At just about the same time, the corners of Sagami’s lips twisted. “Yeah, bet my sister would *love* it… Pfeh,” he spat, and Yuigahama was choked silent.

“Mm-hmm, from what I can see, ’tis a proposal so repulsive, I can feel my gorge rising at the sight of it…,” Zaimokuza added with utter loathing.

“The only saving grace is the fact that it’s never going to happen,” Hatano scoffed in contempt.

RIP to Yuigahama, but if I can get this reaction, that means the content isn’t so bad…

In addition to the idea that had come up during our planning meeting—making it a joint event with nearby elementary, middle, and high schools—Yuigahama had incorporated a copious number of *flash ideas* in this plan. It came out so well that even I would shudder in horror.

In the end, we hadn’t been able to think of anything more

extravagant than Yukinoshita's original plan, so we decided to adjust the setting instead. I'd hypothetically constructed a beach-house-style live venue sort of thing. We'd be circling the campfire on the beach at sunset, a reference to the summer beach events around Shonan. Having the prom there would make for a pretty deranged—er, spirited event. I'd even taken the weather into consideration, mentioning that we might talk with the Hotel Mikazuki to use it as an alternative venue, in case of rain.

Damn, my aptitude for bullshit is scary. If my talents were to continue growing, I might get headhunted by major ad agencies. Truly terrifying.

Meanwhile, Yuigahama seemed displeased at having been categorized as one of the elder Sagami's ilk, as she jerked her face up from where she'd been scowling at the proposal papers.

"I'm sure Kaihin would be okay with this, but what about Hayato?"

"For him…it'd probably be faster to tell him verbally," I said with some bitterness.

"Hmm?" Yuigahama tilted her head curiously. But it wasn't anything worth being curious about.

It would be best to assume cheap tricks wouldn't work on him. If I went to him with the proposal, he'd probably figure out it was a fake event. It would be easier to make progress with him by being up-front that it was a dummy.

"That's the idea, so I'll hand it off to you," I said, and with that, the meeting was adjourned. I got an unenthusiastic reply in return, and we all went to our own tasks.

As Hatano and Sagami the younger were fighting out their opinions on the site design ("Not like that!" "No, change this!"), Yuigahama nodded at them thoughtfully. "Hmm, that's not cute."

After some hesitation, Sagami the younger asked, "…Ummm, if you could be a bit more specific?"

"Well, you know, just like more, like, sparkly…," Yuigahama said unhelpfully, and Sagami and Hatano racked their brains to divine what she meant.

As I enjoyed their suffering, out of the corner of my eye, Zaimokuza started rustling around and pulling out some stuff. "Hachiman, I brought the camera you asked for," he said, laying a chunky digital single-lens reflex camera on top of the desk. Then he started thunking down a pile of instruction books.

“Ohhh, thanks,” I said. “I’ll be borrowing those for a while… And tell me how to use it, just in case.”

“Aye, leave it to me. I know not much, either, but I will humbly proffer you my guidance.”

“Uh, isn’t it yours…?” *Why can’t he use his own stuff…?*

So Zaimokuza taught me the basics, elucidating with arrogance, volume, and a healthy dose of ignorance, and then after he was done, I read over the instruction books.

Now at loose ends, Zaimokuza cleared his throat. “Kepum, kepum.” When I gave him a look that said, *What? You’re being annoying*, he grinned at me for some reason. And then he blushed and looked away. “I thought up…a name…”

“’Kay…” *This is about the light novel he’s not gonna write, isn’t it…?* I thought, ready to ignore him, when he pulled out some folded-over paper from his inside coat pocket. *He wants me to look, huh…?*

Left with no choice, I abandoned the instruction books for the moment and opened that paper. Written there in particularly great handwriting was *Soubu High School Neo-Prom-ject*.

Whoa… The hell is this…? I was cringing away with every cell in my body when I suddenly remembered. “Ohhh. The name.” Zaimokuza had taken seriously my request for “name suggestions ♡” earlier.

Zaimokuza cleared his throat, *gouf, gouf*, and made his coat flutter. “Indeed! This *Neo* part is like—”

“No, I get it; it’s fine.”

“Oh…” Zaimokuza clearly wilted. He’d probably wanted to tell me *neo* was from Greek and not from *The Matrix*, but I really couldn’t care less. The important thing was that it was suitably easy to understand and reasonably stupid.

On that point, this name was actually not bad. The pun in particular might have even been safe to call *quite* stupid. “We’ll go with this. Thanks.”

“Huh?” Zaimokuza was stunned, perhaps because I’d said that so readily.

Ignoring him, I handed the paper around to Hatano and Sagami. “We’ve got a group name now, so put this on.”

“Whaaat…?”

“For real…?” They laughed dryly.

Yuigahama leaned in for a peek, but she seemed satisfied. “I

like it!"

"Hmmg! O-oh… Is it that great…?" Finally understanding the situation, Zaimokuza cleared his throat with a *gefum, gefum* to hide his shyness and joy.

I think it's actually a good title that's sure to go places. Please look forward to Yoshiteru Zaimokuza's next creative work!

X X X

The sun gradually sank in the sky, its reddening rays streaming into the UG Club room.

It was around the time when the other clubs would start wrapping up. Already, the ring from metal bats could no longer be heard, and it had been a long time since the valiant cries of the rugby club had waned. Standing from my seat, I looked from the window into the courtyard to see that the soccer club guys were starting to disperse.

"All right, guess that's about it. Finish up whatever you need to on your own," I said, turning away from the window again.

Everyone rotated their necks and shoulders with tired sighs. Yuigahama was rolling her shoulders, too, as she turned back toward me. "Are you going to see Hayato?"

"Yeah," I answered.

She pulled out her phone and brought it gently to her lips. "How about I call?"

"Yeah…" I considered a moment, then rethought it. "Ah, no, it's fine. Got a better shot of actually catching him if I go myself."

Phones, e-mail, and messaging apps are truly flawed methods of communication. If Hayama were to ignore these contact tools, we would be out of luck. *I didn't notice*, or *I was asleep*, or *My battery died*, or *I lost my cell phone*, or *Now that I think about it, I don't use LINE*, or *I just remembered, I don't even have a cell phone*—it's rare but often happens. Source: me.

Besides, though I'm sure Hayama wouldn't ignore a call from Yuigahama, I didn't want the hassle of trying again another day. Given that we had no time to spare, I wanted to get this done within the day.

Yuigahama nodded, thinking along a similar line. "Oh…but I'll send him a message on LINE, just in case. I'll let you know if he

replies.”

“Okay. Thanks,” I said, quickly getting my things together, and then I left the room.

After I exited through the front entrance, I headed for the sports field.

The courtyard was sandwiched between the main school building and the special-use building, and with both blocking the light, the evening came faster here than elsewhere. Under the pillared overhang of the main school building, the eastern side was in the shadow of the special-use building, and so the darkness was even thicker.

In the dim light, I caught the motion of a shadow.

Focusing my eyes to look, I saw someone at the vending machines under the overhang of the school building. As I came forward, I gradually got a clearer view of their back—probably a girl.

She’d bought some kind of drink. There was a clunking sound, and then she squatted down. When she stood up with the thing she’d purchased in hand, her long, glossy black hair swayed. The pallid, inorganic light from the vending machines lit the ephemeral smile on her narrow white face.

There was no mistaking Yukino Yukinoshita.

She squeezed the can tight and adjusted the coat draped over her shoulders before making her way into the courtyard. Then she sat down on the bench in the middle of the courtyard and vacantly gazed up at the sky.

The desolate, wintry cluster of trees overhead, illuminated by the streetlight, seemed to be watching the bench below it, with orange light raining down through the gaps between their barren branches.

It was just like a painting, and I was tempted to stare at it forever.

But I had to go through here to get to the field and the bicycle parking lot. So while I was aware it would shatter this perfect world, I stepped forward.

She must have heard the sound of my feet then, as she turned toward me. “Oh, Hikigaya.” She was wearing a calm smile, and I gave her a chin nod back.

“…Hey.”

She had apparently been trying to warm her hands with the

can, but then she seemed to suddenly realize something, and she hid it behind her. But there was no way I'd ever miss that characteristic design.

"Unusual drink choice," I commented.

"…It's good for replenishing sugar," she said with an ironic smile, and then with pink cheeks, she tugged her jacket closer together in front, hiding the can inside.

So she's finally realized the charms of the Max can, huh? Excellent.

When I shot a look to the field, I could see the soccer club starting to clean things up. I'd probably have to wait for a while if I wanted to catch Hayama.

When I asked Yukinoshita with a glance, *Mind if I sit?* she nodded, lifting herself up a moment to shift to the side. Leaving a gap of about one person's worth between us, I sat down. "On break?"

"Yes, to get some air," she answered, glancing toward the school building. The student council room was there, still with the lights on. Unlike the Service Club room, which was kind of deserted and empty, the student council room had the heater and everything Isshiki had hauled in there, so perhaps it was more heating efficient.

"I get that. When the heat's on too high, it makes you zone out," I replied. There was a lot of stuff in the UG Club room, too, to hold the warmth, and I found myself agreeing.

Then Yukinoshita put a hand over her mouth, tittering. "My, so then is the heat always on around you? The utility costs there are concerning."

"Relax. I get so many cold glares, it all balances out."

"That's a very eco-friendly lifestyle." Yukinoshita shrugged.

A smile quirked at the corners of my lips. "Yeah. Alternating between hot and cold gets me sorted out, like with a sauna."

"Is that the correct usage of that term…?"

"Oh, I dunno. But with saunas, everyone says *sorted out*. And actually, when you throw on some extra *rouryu* and then go from the *gurushin* pool to an open-air bath, the only way you can express that is *sorted out*," I lectured with a cool, sharp expression.

Yukinoshita's shoulders slumped. "There's nothing sorted about that chaotic mess of words… I didn't understand anything of what you just said."

While I hadn't quite been able to get Yukinoshita to understand,

I could stay in a super *sento* my whole life, you know! Sometimes I'll follow my dad along when he goes, and he pays for me. Some places even have manga there, too, and you can enjoy your weekend more fully than going to some manga café. It's great. Saunas are a pretty old-man hobby, but anime about old-man hobbies are popular these days, so I've got a good feeling the next hot thing will be a manga and anime about girls enjoying saunas. Since it's, y'know, the next *hot*… Never mind.

While we were having this trivial exchange, I stole a quiet glance at Yukinoshita's face.

The determination she'd shown me just a few days earlier when we'd parted ways in the student council room had become a peaceful smile. This expression had become familiar to me, too.

This distance between us made me think of old times, and with a little smirk of my own, I asked, "How are things going?"

Yukinoshita stared at me, a little surprised. But that immediately turned into a teasing smile. "…It's unusual for you to be concerned about someone else."

"That's not true. Did you think I wouldn't perform enemy surveillance?" I replied with a deliberate show of carelessness.

Yukinoshita was momentarily taken aback, but then she smiled again, and she shrugged. "…Well, that's true enough. Things are going fairly well." Her gaze rose, and she seemed to be confirming each item as she said it. "We have a thorough understanding of the tasks at hand, and we've coordinated matters with related parties. I suppose all that's left is to work out the execution on the day of the event." Judging from her tone, it didn't sound like she was pushing herself too hard.

"Wish I could say the same… Well, don't force yourself too much. You should wring every last drop out of Isshiki. That one has promising potential as a corporate slave," I said, half joking.

"Oh, I intend to. You don't have to tell me." A shrewd smile came to Yukinoshita's lips.

Geez… I can't quite tell if she's kidding…

"What about you?" she asked, expression softening.

"Eh, pretty good," I answered, muffled under my scarf. "We don't have to do overtime anyway. I've got a little outside thing that I don't know when will end, but after that, I'll go straight home and handle the rest there."

"So only your attendance management is going well…"

Yukinoshita put a hand to her temple as if she had a headache and sighed. Then she lowered her gaze to stare at the ground. “There’s no need to push yourself so hard,” she added so quietly, it seemed it would disappear along with her white puff of breath.

I replied with a barely perceptible nod, pausing a moment as I tried to grasp for what I should say. “…I’ve always been pushing myself. This is normal for me.”

“I see…” Yukinoshita nodded, digesting this, and didn’t say anything more after that. Instead, she dug her hands into her coat and then held out something to me gently. “If you like…” It was the Max can she’d just bought. When I touched it, it was still warm. Maybe because it had stayed in her inner pocket, unopened.

“Oh, thanks. Uh, but why?”

“You still have more work after this, don’t you? I just came out for a break. I’ll go have a drink inside,” Yukinoshita said, then began rising to her feet.

I held her back with a light gesture, standing up myself instead. “Hold on a second… Oh, what do you want?” I jingled some coins I’d pulled from my pocket.

But Yukinoshita shook her head. “I’m fine. Take that, for your efforts.”

“Uh, there’s no reason I should be the only one getting something. If you’re giving me something for my work, it’s just good manners to return the favor. Are you okay with the same thing? I planned to buy a Max can, too, after all.”

After I said all that, Yukinoshita gave me a grumpy glare. But then she sighed and softened when she realized I wouldn’t take no for an answer. “You always have to make up a reason…” She smiled as if to say, *You’re hopeless*, then sat back down again, cocking her head subtly. “…Well then, the same.”

“Roger,” I replied, trotted off to buy one, then came straight back fast enough to raise my heart rate a little. I handed over my warm prize. “It’s hot,” I said.

Tugging the sleeve of her cardigan out a bit, Yukinoshita timidly accepted it. “Thank you…”

I answered with a little shake of my head, sat back down on the bench, and opened the Max can she’d given me. The faint steam rising from it melted at the edges under the orange light, vanishing in the wind. The sweetness of that first sip spread through my mouth, warming me up from the inside.

As I was slowly nursing my drink, Yukinoshita held her can in both hands, like she was warming herself.

Time passed between us wordlessly. Occasionally, one of us would try to talk, but nothing came out but air. The sense of the distance between us, close enough to see her quiet breaths and minute gestures, was nostalgic to me, even in the dark.

In the end, we had nothing resembling a conversation, until a sound broke our silence—a vibration from my pocket. I must have gotten a call.

"Oh, sorry," I said, and Yukinoshita shook her head to tell me not to worry about it. Nodding back, I pulled out my phone to see the call was from Yuigahama. I was about to accept it when the vibration stopped.

What was that? I wondered when I heard footsteps like the dragging heels of loafers.

Yukinoshita turned around before I did. "Good evening, Yuigahama," she called.

"Yeah… Yahallo, Yukinon." Yuigahama spoke softly, too, waving a hand in a tiny motion in front of her chest as she slowly came over to the bench. Her coat, scarf, and backpack were lit under the streetlights, showing she was ready to go home.

"…What is it?" I asked. "Did Hayama say anything?"

"Yeah. He said he'll make the time if you're okay talking over dinner… So I called you," Yuigahama answered, waving the phone in her hand. If she'd gotten a hold of him, then there was no need for me to wait any longer. Talking over a meal meant we'd probably be meeting at the station. Drinking down what was left of my coffee, I stood.

"Work?" Yukinoshita asked.

"Yeah." I nodded in return.

Yukinoshita checked the time, too, and she put her Max can away in her pocket and stood. "I'm going back to work as well."

"Wait." As Yukinoshita was passing by, Yuigahama took her hand. Yukinoshita froze with some surprise, giving Yuigahama a confused look.

Yuigahama's free hand fiddled bashfully with her bun. "I—I kinda feel like it's been a while. It's weird, though I know it's only been a few days," she said with a shy smile.

"Yes… I've been so busy with work, I haven't quite been able to get the time to relax," Yukinoshita replied with a similar expression.

Yuigahama's eyes lowered. "No, I don't think that's it." Raising them again, she hesitated before examining Yukinoshita. "…Have you been avoiding me?"

Yukinoshita seemed taken aback, and her tone became a little emphatic. "No, that's not what it is. It's just that I've been preparing for the prom, and then there was that notice about the cancellation, and there's been so much to get done…" The further she got in her argument, the more she wilted, until her words faded into moist air. Biting the edge of her lip, she hung her head.

"Gotcha. Sorry…," Yuigahama apologized weakly.

And they both fell silent.

I wondered if I should say something. After I failed to think of anything appropriate, I just opened my mouth. "…Hey."

Yuigahama's head jerked up, and so did Yukinoshita's.

Yuigahama squeezed both Yukinoshita's hands. "Listen, I'm helping Hikki." The words were so unexpected, I was momentarily unsure how to respond.

"…Nobody…said?" I muttered under my breath. Since Yuigahama had been acting like she and Yukinoshita were in contact on LINE or whatever, I'd assumed they'd already talked about it. I should have told Yukinoshita first. I hated that I'd made Yuigahama say it, with things so awkward here.

Then Yukinoshita glanced over at me, shaking her head as if to say, *Don't worry about it*. Turning to Yuigahama again, she squeezed her hands back and said gently, "It's all right. I do understand."

"…No, you don't." Yuigahama's face crumpled a bit. "I'm trying to do this the right way. Once this is over…I *will* do it properly… So you won't get what you want, Yukinon." Yuigahama explained fervently, gazing right into Yukinoshita's eyes.

Yukinoshita nodded just once, making sure Yuigahama had no more to say. "…I see. I believe it would be best if your wish came true," she said, and I could see no sorrow in her expression, only an earnest prayer.

But Yuigahama was not relieved. She took a few shallow breaths, then looked at Yukinoshita imploringly. "…Do you know what it is I want? Do you really get it?"

"Yes. Because I think it's the same," Yukinoshita said without hesitation. Her tender little smile showed clear affection, and there was no uncertainty in her honest gaze.

"Okay… All right, then." Yuigahama let out a deep, deep sigh,

then gently released Yukinoshita as she took a step back.

Yukinoshita watched with a fragile smile as Yuigahama's hands weakly fell. "Then I'll be going," she said, squeezing her now empty fingers.

I answered that with a look at both of them, but Yuigahama's eyes were still on the ground.

Yukinoshita let out a breath, like she didn't know what else to do, before eventually turning away. The sound of her loafers hitting the brick paving rang through the courtyard, growing distant one step after another.

Watching her go, I let out a weak sigh—but that did nothing to change the heavy feelings coiling in the pit of my stomach.

"Let's get going," I said to Yuigahama, who was still standing there. I didn't think those were the right words, but pathetically enough, I had nothing else to say.

"Uh-huh," Yuigahama said in a near whisper, but she didn't start walking.

Yukinoshita reached the shadow of the school building, her footsteps especially loud as the ephemeral sight of her back melted away.

Before she was out of earshot, Yuigahama's face jerked up, and she rushed over.

Yukinoshita noticed those footsteps and started turning around.

That moment, Yuigahama leaped at her and hugged her tight. Squeaking in surprise and confusion, Yukinoshita staggered back, and her coat slid off a little.

Yuigahama fixed the coat and buried her face in Yukinoshita's narrow shoulders. "Once the prom's over, we'll go out to eat together. And I'll sleep over at your place again. And we'll go to Destiny Land and Destiny Sea during spring vacation, and then you'll come stay over with me again, and then in April…," she rambled, voice trembling, sniffing only once. Then she raised her chin to take a breath and grinned. "What should we do in April? There's so much stuff I wanna do together. Food and shopping, or a hot stone spa or something, would be nice, but there's just so much stuff! It'll take years—decades, even."

Yukinoshita's eyes blurred under the pale orange light of the streetlamp. Her tightly squeezed fists opened, and she cautiously reached out to give Yuigahama's shoulder a light touch. Then, she pressed her forehead against it instead, hiding her face. "That…

really is a lot. Can we do all that?"

"Yeah! Because I'll be with you until we do it all… So it'll be okay."

In her tight embrace, Yukinoshita let out a confused breath. But Yuigahama didn't mind, squeezing her even tighter. "You get that?" Yuigahama playfully curled around Yukinoshita to touch her cheek to the back of her neck.

Yukinoshita squirmed in apparent embarrassment. "Yes, I understand. I do…"

"Do you really, actually get it?"

"I do, so…let me go…" But even as Yukinoshita said that, she wasn't really trying to peel Yuigahama off, and every time she moved a bit away, Yuigahama came close again. Watching the two of them, I let out a short sigh.

We're really awful at saying it. You keep thinking you said it, thinking you knew it, thinking you understood, and even after so many repetitions, it felt like we still hadn't grown.

We both knew there was actually a simpler way to get it across.

But that didn't seem right.

I studied them, hoping for the best, so that at least I wouldn't go wrong.

X X X

After Yukinoshita returned to the student council room, Yuigahama and I headed for the station.

As the sun set and the temperature cooled, we wove through residential areas to avoid the blowing wind. The creaking sound of my bicycle as I pushed it along disappeared into the cold, wintry wind.

On the way, Yuigahama chatted about plenty of things with me, but she never touched on her exchange with Yukinoshita. It seemed to me like she was deliberately avoiding it. Out of respect for her consideration, I didn't mention it, either.

So naturally, the subject headed in a different direction.

"The soccer club practices pretty late, huh?" Yuigahama said.

"Yeah, well, today's later than usual."

Our sports field really isn't very big, but the soccer, baseball, rugby, and track clubs all use it, making compromises with each

other so they could practice there. So depending on how the clubs negotiated it, their activities and practice hours were all over the place.

When I explained this to her, Yuigahama made a disinterested *ohhh* sort of sound. “Huhhh, you know a lot about it.”

“Uh, just a normal amount…”

Yuigahama’s remark was pretty inconsequential, but she seemed to think I was deeply interested in the soccer club, so I cleared my throat with a *gefum, gefum* and changed the subject. “Uh, anyway, I was thinking we’d take pictures tomorrow.”

Her attention distracted, Yuigahama nodded. “Ohhh, pictures, huh?”

“I’m thinking about taking them at the beach. Could you model for me?”

“Huh?! Me?! Oh, that’d be kind of embarrassing, though…” She petted at her bun with her fuzzy mittens.

“It can just be from behind. Here, look at these ones I found. I’m thinking it’d be good to take some shots of two or three people like this, together.” While pushing my bike, I pulled out my phone and showed her the photos I wanted to use as reference.

Stepping close, Yuigahama examined them. “Ohhh, okay, from behind, that miiight work… I’ll bring it up with Yumiko and Hina.”

Then she continued walking close at my side, without moving away again. I awkwardly pulled the front of my coat together and tugged my scarf up to my mouth as I walked faster.

Eventually, we passed through the crowds around the station and arrived at the Saize. I parked my bicycle and went into the restaurant, searching around for the one who’d already arrived.

Of course, nothing would have changed about Saize since we were here a few days ago. The only major difference was Hayato Hayama with that charming smile of his, waving cheerily at us.

Hayama went to the trouble of getting up and moving around the table, opening up one side of the four-seat booth for me and Yuigahama before lowering his raised hand in a gesture that said, *Have a seat, miss*.

Irritatingly enough, that cheeky little move did cut a nice picture… But what irked me most of all was the guy beside Hayama, eating pasta with a happy-go-lucky expression…

“Why’re you here, Tobecchi?” Yuigahama said before I could, as soon as she sat down.

Tobe *herk*ed. “Dude… Should I not be here…? Hayato said we were all going out to eat, so…” Tobe turned to Yuigahama and seemed a bit freaked out.

Yuigahama waved a casual hand at him and smiled. “Oh, no. I was just a little surprised you were here, ’cause you weren’t invited.”

“…Ah, yeah. Good point…” Yuigahama wasn’t trying to be mean, but a blunt comment like that, delivered with a smile, hurts more than you’d think. Tobe’s lips stiffened, and he put his fork down awkwardly. Then he glanced at me and Hayama. I knew what he was asking: *Huh? This bad? I’ll go? Should I go? Dude…* It was extremely obnoxious.

“…Well, it doesn’t make a difference whether you’re here or not,” I said, looking over to Hayama.

In the corner of my eye, Tobe was grumbling, “Dude…do you gotta say it like… Geez…”

Hayama grinned awkwardly at him before turning back to us.

“Sorry for taking up your time,” Yuigahama said, putting her hands together in a little gesture in front of her.

“I can’t just say no if you’re asking, Yui,” Hayama answered with a smile.

So then if I’d been the one to ask, would you have refused…? I eyed Hayama doubtfully as he got the conversation started.

“So what did you want to talk about?”

“You know about the prom, right?” I said, guessing he would have heard about it from Isshiki or Yuigahama.

“Yeah, more or less,” Hayama replied briefly.

“Well, now some of the parents are saying it’s unwholesome or whatever and are forcing the student council to ‘exercise self-restraint’ and cancel it themselves… So we’ve come up with a plan for a new prom that’s even bigger and wilder,” I said.

Tobe stopped slurping his pasta. “…Huh? Why?”

“To make sure the prom happens,” I said to Hayama, completely ignoring Tobe now.

Hayama folded his arms, putting a hand to his chin as he considered quietly. After a while, he seemed to figure it out, as he muttered, “…So basically, you’re baiting them.”

The moment he said that, the corners of my lips twisted into an unpleasant, ironic smirk. “Quick on the uptake. That makes things easier.”

“Oh, I don’t understand it, honestly.” Hayama answered with a shrug, like this was too much trouble for him.

Beside him, Tobe’s gaze was ping-ponging between us as he desperately racked his brain, then finally just gave up. He leaned forward over the table, whispering “What’s going on?” to Yuigahama.

Then Yuigahama quietly started explaining with an “Ummm…”

Well, Tobe didn’t really have to get it. The one we were dealing with was Hayama. While they were busy whispering to each other, I got to the point. “So we want help from the captains’ association.”

“I don’t think there’s anything we can do, though. We don’t have much authority.” Hayama attempted to brusquely end the discussion.

Come on, listen, I gestured. “I know. I just want to make a little proposal. You guys have farewell parties, right? Haven’t you considered having one with all the clubs? We want to arrange the new prom as a part of that.”

“Farewell parties…” Following up the pasta, Tobe was reaching out for the pilaf when his hand stopped. Then he tilted his head like, *Huhhh?* and stared at Hayama.

Hayama smiled wryly. “That does sound familiar.”

When I asked with a look what he meant, Hayama reached for his coffee cup and took a sip. It was espresso, but his expression didn’t betray a hint of bitterness. “The student council has already asked about a joint farewell party,” he said calmly.

I was sure I was appearing more bitter, being the one who’d asked. But even seeing that, Hayama didn’t twitch as he continued, “The captains’ association intends to work with the student council. Actually, we’re purely under their authority, as an organization. So we aren’t able to help you.”

I couldn’t say anything to that. *Ngh.*

She really does move fast. She’s already gone through with the ideas we had…? Yukinoshita must also have considered using the captains’ association to reinforce her own plan.

I don’t know why, but there’s this embedded belief in society that sports clubs are wholesome. A lot of older people will write off minor crimes as just a bit of childish mischief. They’re strangely generous toward any hot-blooded young people working up a refreshing sweat. But are they actually wholesome? They’re not, and there’s some incident every year that some team has to

apologize for by abstaining from activities or withdrawing from competitions. Lately, it seems like lots of stuff is coming to light with sexual harassment, abuse of power, violence, and drugs!

But I would hate to back down now. Even knowing it was pointless to fight this, I had to negotiate. You've gotta do it, or there's no point. Praying that Hayama Magic would make the call for Chiba, I opened my mouth. "…So how about as an individual? Would you help us out as Hayato Hayama, the man, with titles off the table?"

"I want to help you as an individual even less." Hayama's nose wrinkled in sincere distaste. He made me think of a boxer who'd been struck in the liver.

Okay, then this is the spot to attack! "You can just let us borrow your name, though."

"Yeah, and I doubt I'd get it back." He got a clean return hit with a sharp counter, and my head slumped.

"Well, true…" Fair enough—if I borrowed Hayama's name, I'd do whatever I pleased with it. I'd use it to the grave. I'd even forge his signature to take out a home loan without permission. *I did it, Zaimokuza! Now we can buy an apartment!*

When I nodded *hmm, hmm*, Hayama glowered at me. "At least try to argue… You're the type to write your own name on a video game you borrowed and then sell it, aren't you? Yeah, no way."

"Don't misjudge me. I don't do stuff like that. I've never had a friend to lend me a game in the first place," I retorted proudly.

Hayama heaved a deep sigh, while beside him, Tobe waxed nostalgic. "Oh, I remember that guy—he wrote it in permanent marker, then went to sell 'em at Geo… I wonder how Akkun's doing."

Yuigahama's mouth was hanging open in surprise as she just stared at us without a word. Curious, Hayama smiled gently at her and asked, "Is something the matter?"

"Oh, that was just a little surprising." Yuigahama looked between me and Hayama, then laughed with a hint of pleasure.

Hayama closed his mouth uncomfortably and pretended to adjust his seat, but really he was trying to shift away from me.

Well, if you only knew Hayato Hayama as a nice guy, maybe seeing him being so mean to me was a bit shocking. *Oh, that Hayama does have something of a personality, though…*

As I was thinking this, Tobe, who had to know Hayama better

than me, suddenly swept up the hair at the back of his head with a hint of pride. “Well, Hayato can be kinda savage sometimes.” Tobe grinned at him as if to say, *Right?*

Hayama cleared his throat and avoided the question. “Why is this even happening? I haven’t heard anything from Yukinoshita about this bait event.”

“Course you haven’t. We’re doing it on our own.”

Hayama cocked his head a couple of degrees, asking with his eyes, *What’s that supposed to mean?*

But it was because I *didn’t* want to explain that I’d given him such a short answer. I said nothing more, continuing to lean my face on my hand as I fell silent.

Though I’m sure Hayama could sense I wasn’t going to talk, he asked again, “You’re not doing it together…? Did something happen?” He maintained eye contact, setting his elbows on the table as he laced his fingers. He was going to wait as long as it took.

I quietly sighed. “That’s our business. You don’t need to worry about it.”

Instantly, something black wavered, stirring deep in Hayama’s eyes. I couldn’t quite say anything, but I managed to shrug back at him.

That didn’t mollify him at all, and I could feel the air drying and becoming tense. The others at the table must also have sensed that, too, as Tobe squirmed around uncomfortably.

Yuigahama’s eyes were lowered sadly, but eventually she broke the silence. “I think Yukinon…wants to prove she can do it herself. Like, she thinks at this rate, she’ll become dependent, so…she won’t rely on me…or Hikki. That’s what she’s decided.”

Hayama inhaled sharply, a little rattled. Then he asked slowly, emphatically, “…Is that what she said?”

Yuigahama didn’t look up, just nodded back.

“I see…” Hayama heaved a sigh and closed his eyes. I didn’t know what that meant. But I could pick up on his distress in the way he bit his lip.

A suffocating stillness passed, while the chatter in the restaurant felt like it was becoming louder. Yuigahama and I both closed our mouths and focused on our hands.

“Uhhhh, so, like, have you guys eaten? You aren’t hungry? Wanna order something?” Tobe gave us a forced grin and opened the menu. Either he found the awkwardness unbearable, or he was

trying to be considerate.

Yuigahama looked over at me like, *What'll you have?* I gave her a little shake of my head in reply.

"No, I'm good. I'm gonna get going soon." I didn't feel like I could say it out loud, but I hoped he got my silent *Thank you.*

Tobe seemed a little confused, though. "O-okay…"

Now that the silence was broken, Hayama breathed a short sigh. "I'll offer my full cooperation for the prom itself. But I can't help you—not with the captains' association or as an individual… But I won't stop any members from helping out if they want to… That's as much of a compromise as I'll offer." Hayama's gaze was focused on the cup in front of him. The reflection of its swirling black surface was all that his eyes revealed, and I couldn't see any light in their depths.

"…Well, I can't say I'm surprised. That's enough," I said.

Yuigahama looked at me with some unease. "Is that okay, Hikki?"

"Yeah." I didn't mind if the captains' association was working with Yukinoshita and the student council. Just getting that promise from Hayama himself was enough. My end goal was to make their prom happen. It was just that she'd played her card first in the matter of the captains' association, and the effect was about the same.

For my part, I just had to prepare another card for myself.

"I'll handle the bill. Sorry for making you come all the way out here." Snatching up the receipt, I stood from my seat, and Yuigahama hurried after me.

When we left the booth, Hayama seemed to debate whether he should get up, but in the end, he rose to his feet with a resigned sigh. As the last one at the table, Tobe quickly bolted down the rest of his pilaf and washed it down with cola before following us out the door.

X X X

By the time I'd paid the tab and come outside, the scenery had fully turned to night.

The evening rush had begun, with more passing foot traffic in front of the station, and we stepped out into the flow basically

together. *Guess we go for the station first…*, I thought, deciding to push my bicycle after Yuigahama and Tobe, who were walking ahead.

Then a voice called out to me from behind. “Do you have a minute?”

“Huh?” I turned back to see Hayama standing there idly. Yuigahama and Tobe must have wondered why we’d stopped, as they came back to check up on us.

Hayama gave Tobe a look and a slight nod. Tobe got whatever that message was supposed to be; he scrubbed and tugged at the hair at the back of his head as he replied, “Ah, then, I’ll walk Yui back.”

Yuigahama was confused. “Huh? Why?”

“Why?! H-huh?! Why not?!” Tobe replied.

“Uh, I mean, you live the other way, Tobecchi.” Yuigahama waved her hands. “I live close. I can just go home like normal.”

“You really get to the point! Come on, but it’s, like, pretty normal to take you back, then…”

“What? Uh, you don’t have to, seriously. I’ll be okay.”

“Dude… You’re saying it so seriously…” Tobe seemed surprised by her reaction, struck speechless.

Ignoring him, Yuigahama hopped a step over to me and waved lightly at me. “See you tomorrow, then, Hikki. And you too, Hayato.”

“Yeah. See you tomorrow,” I said with a nod.

Hayama gave her a little wave. “Night.”

As Yuigahama walked steadily off, Tobe followed after her, still confused. I watched the two of them go, until Hayama and I were alone in the throng.

Once the others were completely out of sight, I finally turned to him. “…So what is it?”

“Let’s walk a little,” Hayama said instead of answering my question. Without waiting for my response, he started moving. He didn’t say where he was going, but his back was telling me to follow.

I pushed my bicycle after him for a while.

We went along a back alley a block away from the main downtown street, coming out to a corner encircled by roadside trees. I wasn’t very familiar with this area, but from the swings and slides and such, I was guessing it was a park.

Going past the playground equipment, Hayama stopped when he reached the gazebo. “Wait here a moment.”

“Ah, hey,” I called out, trying to stop him, but Hayama rushed off. With nothing else to do, I parked my bicycle and sat down on the gazebo bench.

There was no sign of anyone else there, and the park was dead silent. Nothing stood around the big, wide park to shield it from the cold wind that swept through. I tugged the collar of my coat closer together, wrapped my scarf tighter, stuffed my hands in my pockets, and bounced my knees as I waited for Hayama.

As white puffs of breath left my mouth, there was a crunch of gravel behind me. Turning around, I saw Hayama coming back with a canned coffee in his hands.

“Heads up,” he said, just before he tossed it at me.

Panicking, I yanked my hands from my pockets and caught it in the nick of time. “Whoa… Just hand it to me normally…,” I snapped with a short sigh of relief. The heat from the can seeped into my palms. “Geez, that’s hot,” I mumbled under my breath as I tossed it up and down, and once it was cool enough to drink, I popped open the tab and started sipping at it.

Hayama smiled in satisfaction as he watched me, then took a seat one bench over. He held his canned coffee between his hands but eventually did like me and drank it. Then with a little sigh, he muttered, “I remembered the past.”

“What’re you talking about?” I looked over, just out of the corner of my eyes.

Hayama leaned a bit forward, staring at the can in his hands. There was a shadow over his profile, under the light of the streetlamp. “…I mean what happened a long time ago. You know how she was alone when she was in elementary school? She said something similar then, too… That she could handle being alone, and she wouldn’t rely on me… That she didn’t need saving.”

“Huhhh… I’ve heard that somewhere before,” I shot back.

“Yeah, that’s why I remembered it.” Hayama raised his chin and answered with a smile. But his tone quickly turned somber. “… I couldn’t do anything that time, either.” His gaze dropped. “No, that’s not right. The end result was even more cruel. I offered my help halfheartedly, which only opened the wound. I said…I would find a way, despite the limitations.” He gave me a masochistic sort of look.

It was annoying, and I shrugged. “What is this supposed to be? Penance? I think that wall over there would be more interested than me.”

“This is about the same, isn’t it?” His voice was joking, although his eyebrows were tilted down in an apologetic expression beneath the streetlamp. But the trembling of the steel can in his hand belied those gentler emotions. Another cold wind blew past, but I don’t think that was why his hand was shaking.

He was still haunted by regret, or maybe anger.

I remembered the previous summer, when Hayama and Yukinoshita had spoken a little about their past. It wasn’t like I’d heard the story directly, so I’d had to fill in a lot of the gaps myself, but I think her situation had been just like Rumi Tsurumi’s.

It wasn’t difficult to imagine that her good looks, temperament, and wit had made her stand out, ever since she was very young. And it was easy to imagine how children so special, so unique, would be treated by the others.

And in that sort of situation, her childhood friend Hayato Hayama had chosen just about the worst option I could think of. Basically, he’d tried to mediate to make Yukinoshita friends with everyone, with other girls.

But that had just made things harder for her. Of course—that’s what it means for Hayato Hayama to make a move. To say nothing of when they were all little, with more feelings than they could handle. Self-restraint wasn’t an option there.

I had no way of knowing how clever he’d been back then, but now he understood how foolish he’d been, at least.

“I should have done everything I could to save her then. If I had…,” Hayama said.

If he had, then what?

The way he talked got on my nerves, and I narrowed my eyes. “What’s the point of these what-ifs?”

“Well, *she* doesn’t want to be like this, does she?” Hayama gave a self-deprecating smile, as if to turn aside my gaze. There wasn’t even an ounce of his usual charm there; dark passions swirled in the depths of his murky eyes. “You shouldn’t engage with this halfway. You need to take it seriously, face it with everything you have. I didn’t have the determination or motivation for that…but you’re different, aren’t you?”

His words suggesting an impossible future, his imploring eyes,

his mouth describing a past unknown to me—all of it was so aggravating, I clenched my teeth until they creaked. “Those are your regrets. Don’t dump them on me.” My tone turned sharper as I glared at him.

Hayama’s eyes slid down. “True… Those are my regrets. I’ve been holding on to them ever since. I can’t erase or forget. I’m always looking back… I can’t move on.” His fingers clutched at his chest, and he grunted a little with pain. His handsome face was full of sorrow, and the force in his voice sounded painful, too.

What would those who knew the regular Hayato Hayama think if they saw him like this? Would they feel despair? Or sympathy? Or contempt?

What I felt was envy. Those regrets seemed like something to be jealous of.

If only I could manage to carve something into myself that vividly. If only I could carry something close to my chest my whole life, like a treasure. If only I could feel so deeply about one thing that I could never forget it.

I have no regrets like that.

That anguish was so astounding to me, I could hardly stand to witness it.

But then Hayama’s foot crunched on the sand, and he shifted his whole body toward me, preventing me from escaping his gaze. “Hikigaya…your way of doing things is wrong. I know that’s not what you should be doing.”

I couldn’t turn my eyes or my head away, so I closed my eyes.

It’s just you.

You’re the only one who’ll say that to me—the only one who’ll say something that is completely right, vague enough to be interpreted freely, and absolutely worthless.

I’m really glad you’re Hayato Hayama.

He can’t ignore someone being hurt, and he can’t forgive someone who hurts another. That’s why he still can’t forgive himself.

He tried to avoid harming anyone, which led to harming someone important to him—and yet he still can’t betray the image built up by him and everyone around him. He’s ultimately been driven to a dead end, and that’s why he was giving me this meaningless, righteous argument with obvious pain. Even now he was hurting himself.

He knew it was something he couldn't do, understood it was something I can't do, but he couldn't *not* say it.

This is the thing about him that I really can't stand.

I really do hate him.

That's why I can say this, too.

I'm sure I wouldn't say this in front of anyone else.

I'll say it because it's you. I can sympathize with you so much, but I can't understand you at all. You have only one point in common with me and yet too many similarities, and that part of you that won't forgive me for those differences. I'll say it because it's you, who never, ever goes wrong.

Clenching my teeth and fists tight, I let out a small, weak breath. "Shut up… I know."

I knew this was the wrong way of going about things. But I didn't have anything else. I don't know any other way. In the end, this was the only way we could communicate.

There was just one thing I could do.

Just one.

"I understand all that. I'm doing this in full knowledge. That's the only way to prove it." Slowly opening my eyes, I could see my exhalation drift from my mouth and then disappear. It was just like my words, vanishing the moment they were out of my mouth.

"…Prove what?" Hayama leveled a hard look at me. If he was going to ask me that seriously, I didn't know what to say. I hadn't really prepared any further explanation.

I briefly considered if I should make something up or just say whatever came to mind or bluff, but in the end, I decided not to keep it inside. "If she doesn't need saving, but I still want to save her anyway…then that's not codependency. If I can prove that, that's enough," I said with a completely real smile.

Hayama blinked, surprised by either my expression or what I'd said. Then his shoulders relaxed, and a little smile came to his lips. "Hikigaya… Do you know what that feeling is called?"

"I do. It's a man's pride." I smirked as I pretended not to know what he meant.

Interlude…

Even after he'd left, I couldn't get up off that park bench. If he was going to smirk at me and lie that blatantly, then I had nothing to say.

We didn't speak to each other after that, and he finished the canned coffee he assumed I had bought for him. He muttered his "See you" so quietly that the wind nearly drowned it out, then quickly left. Maybe he couldn't handle the embarrassment.

So here I was, alone in the park.

I really do hate him. I honestly can't forgive myself for having wavered over a remark like that, even for a moment.

After my umpteenth sigh of that night, I checked the phone in my hand again. Frankly speaking, I didn't feel like being the one to call.

But I had to check, or I wouldn't, he wouldn't, she wouldn't be able to move beyond this. If I were to go along with that first-class heap of BS, I would say I have my own pride as a man, too.

The wind had been blowing through here for a long time, leaving my fingers entirely numb with cold as I pressed the Call button—all the while praying she wouldn't pick up.

But that's when she always answers. Right as I became certain of that, the ringing cut off, and I heard her drawn-out voice. "Helloooo."

I said the sentence I'd decided on before talking to him. "Could we meet now?"

"…Yeah. Sure."

In that short silence, she seemed to catch something. She's always so sharp, I really don't know what to do with her. I've never been able to hide anything from her. I'm sure she'll always be like that.

While I had the same bad feeling about this I always had, we had a businesslike exchange of just a few remarks, and then she

quickly hung up on me.

X X X

The café she'd indicated was a place she'd gone to a lot in the past.

I finished the Blue Mountain, which was not cheap for a teenager, and then after ordering a second, I checked my watch. She was already late, but she hadn't messaged me at all.

If I was even a couple of minutes late when she asked to meet up suddenly, she'd call and tell me to hurry up, but when she was late, this was how it went. But I was used to it, so I wasn't going to make a point of calling her or anything.

Just once, I'd asked her if she was like that with other people. She'd proudly said she was, but that's not true. She'll be pretty faithful with time and appointments. When she's meeting with her friends, she'll sometimes come too early. Even when they make her wait, she won't rush to chase them down.

But she has a tendency to be rougher with certain people.

You could take it as an expression of affection or trust. I could actually see a trend like that with him, and her sister, too. She reveals a sort of innocence with them, like a cat toying with its prey.

But there are exceptions. Those who have failed even as toys, she only values as a scratching post.

As I was lost in my thoughts, my second Blue Mountain came. When I brought it to my lips, it tasted more bitter than the one before.

Eventually, the sound of a cowbell mingled with the standard jazz number playing on low. At the door, her rouge caught the eye against the noir background of the café interior. She ordered at the counter as she stripped off her coat, then came straight toward me without even turning her head and sat down opposite me.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, and I shook my head, waiting for the Guatemala she'd ordered to come.

Cup in hand, I paused before finally broaching what I'd called her for. "You told him…it was codependency?"

I asked it without any preamble at all, so maybe that was why she seemed a little surprised. That was rare for her, and I couldn't help but break into a smile.

As if in response, she smiled back. "…You heard? Surprising. I wouldn't expect him to tell you about that."

I found myself wondering what I should take that smile to mean. Was she purely amused by the unexpected nature of what he'd done, or was she thinking with contempt, *Oh, so he'd tell someone like you?*

Whatever the case, whichever it was, her target wasn't me—it was him.

So then she should be talking to him, not me.

"No, he just mentioned the term when discussing something else… But I could think of someone who would choose to use that kind of language to provoke him."

"Not bad, ace detective. You've cracked the case." For how jokingly she'd said it, deep in her eyes was an icy coldness. She was clearly saying to stay out, to stop while this was still half-teasing.

I chose to ignore it, dropping my gaze to the coffee cup in my hands. "Why would you say something like that?"

"I mean, 'cause it's true," she said without any shyness—gleefully, in fact.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught her lacing her long fingers together, and I sighed quietly. "They were fine like that. Doing it bit by bit…"

"It's fake. I only want to see something real," she interrupted. Her tone…must have been chilly. I was probably the only one who felt it sounded petulant. I just thought so because we'd known each other for so long, but only I would be able to tell.

While that feeling was still clear and warm in my chest, I lifted my chin and looked her in the eye. "I think feelings can grow out of that, too."

"Nope. It was never like that before, was it?" She narrowed her eyes slowly, piercing me with her frozen gaze. Her remark reminded me of the words said on that summer day.

Her gaze, her voice, always caught me. Ultimately, I couldn't move forward, and she was stopped there, too.

She never changed. In order to keep what she treasured from being wounded by anyone any further, she got the jump on them and caused the injury herself. And she wouldn't let anyone else do the same.

"Do you…feel that much hate over it?"

I didn't ask *who* she hated.

She blinked, as if she was taken aback. But then she immediately grinned with satisfaction. “No, this is love.” Leaning her chin on her hand, she gazed up at me with dewy eyes, her painted lips shaped into an enchanting smile.

This is a curse.

I would never be able to atone.

So I forced it on him and hoped that maybe, if they could…

Oh, I really do envy them.

If you can need each other and fall to hell together, there’s no greater joy. Maybe it was some twisted counterfeit, but if it was the only one in the world, then nobody would be able to call it that. If I’d had that in my grasp, I’m sure I would have been able to give this crooked shape a name.

That’s why I still regret it, now.

If I’d given everything I had to saving her then.

If I had, then…

…would you have forgiven me?

7

What **Hina Ebina** sees through the lens is…

I really, really didn't want to go to school.

More specifically, I didn't want to go into the classroom.

Well, to be honest, I didn't want to see Hayato Hayama.

To be both honest and specific, I extremely did not want to see Hayama and suddenly get awkward about it, while he acts like it's nothing and has a normal day.

No.

To speak the honest truth from my heart, I didn't want to see him pretend to have a normal day, then catch a glimpse of his pain when he thought no one was looking.

The night before, I'd basically said my piece and ran instead of saying good-bye, so I hadn't really seen his response. His mouth had dropped open, and he'd reacted with something between shock and exasperation, like you would if you'd stumbled across some rare beast. I'd figured whatever he said would be way too much trouble, so I'd feigned ignorance and made a break for it.

In the classroom that morning, I sneaked a glance at Hayama and the rest of the group chatting by the window like always, then immediately went facedown on my desk.

Nothing any different from the usual. Just dawn light shining in through the window and energetic conversations with bright voices.

But just for a moment, in his smile, I'd picked up faint signs of distress.

Maybe that smile hadn't really meant anything. Maybe that had been his usual charming mask. If so, that distress was just me reading into it, or even projecting something from myself.

This was why I'd never wanted to have a real conversation with Hayama. Things I'd been pretending not to see were being vividly shoved in my face, and all it brought me was guilt. Hayama had to feel the same, too.

Ultimately, Hayama and I couldn't even become mirrors to each

other; we just kept seeking out mistakes in one another while we selfishly vented our irritation. I know I do that, which is why I make an effort not to look at him.

Still, it hadn't all been bad. Thanks to that night, I did manage to feel certain about one thing. Verbalizing it solidified my awareness of that goal.

That BS about a man's pride had been worth it.

I didn't look at Hayama after that, and the time passed aimlessly.

I lifted my face from my desk, glaring at the clock hanging on the wall. With yet another deep sigh, I stared at the hands, which were going far slower than usual.

Though it was my own seat, it felt weirdly uncomfortable. All I could think about was how I wanted school to hurry up and be over already.

X X X

C'mon, just end…

Despite all my wishing, once school actually was over and I dashed out of the classroom, I arrived at the UG Club room and found myself sighing again.

It began with my report.

"…And so Hayama will not be offering his cooperation." Remembering what had happened the day before, a bitter smile crossed my face.

But the other faces present were muuuch more bitter.

"Whaaat…?"

"That's not good…"

"All avenues exhausted…"

Hatano and Sagami were both taking the news grimly, while Zaimokuza was in deep distress.

Yuigahama was the only one forcing herself to smile as she consoled the others. "C-come on, guys… We still haven't talked with Kaihin and stuff yet. Right, Hikki?"

"Exactly right. So first, we contact Kaihin," I said, turning toward Yuigahama.

But she just let her arms flop under the table and cocked her head. "Huh, what?"

“Huh? I mean, their number…”

“…Huh? Me? Don’t you know it, Hikki?” Yuigahama’s head tilted from one side to the other.

And then silence fell.

That instant was like staring dominoes. I glanced at Zaimokuza, who looked over at Sagami, who nodded at Hatano, who glared at me. Once we’d done a full circle, my eyes went back to Yuigahama.

“So you don’t know… I kinda don’t wanna make the call…They might think it’s weird if I contact them out of the blue…” Yuigahama sighed, a little tired, then pulled her phone out of her pocket.

I gave her a lukewarm look that said, *It’s okay, it’s okay, all boys worry about that at some point; they’re definitely gonna think you’re weird regardless. Girls just all think like, “Why is he suddenly asking about what’s been assigned for homework…?”* Yuigahama glanced back at me.

“But hey, Hikki, don’t you know, um…Orimoto’s number?”

“I deleted it,” I answered instantly.

“Erk…” Yuigahama froze with her phone in hand, speechless.

“You normally delete numbers like that the minute you graduate middle school, right? I’m never gonna see those people again, after all. It’s a waste of storage,” I snapped.

“That’s not normal, okay?!” Yuigahama instantly retorted.

But the reaction from the others was less aggressive—in fact, they were on my side here, nodding in agreement.

Yuigahama did a double, then a triple take. “Huh?! I’m the weird one here?!” She slapped a hand to her forehead with a groan.

“But, like, you exchanged numbers with her, right?” I asked.

“…Just in case, since I was kinda in charge of contacts for the Christmas event. Though I’ve never really talked with her…” As Yuigahama approached the latter half of her sentence, her voice gradually faded out, and her shoulders drooped.

Thinking back, I did get the feeling Yuigahama had mostly been patching up our flubs and contacting people and managing money stuff. But the boys from Kaihin were impossible to talk to, across the board. So she must have been talking with Orimoto and the girls.

Yuigahama and Orimoto had met a bunch of times, but I’d never seen them having a friendly conversation. In fact, there was more of an uncomfortable tension between them.

Yuigahama was a communication skills monster, and Orimoto was a conformity beast, but maybe they weren't very compatible. Well, their initial meeting *was* a bit of a unique situation… Admittedly, that was not something we could have avoided… In fact, it was Hayama's fault, wasn't it?! That's it! Well, of course I wouldn't say I had absolutely nothing to do with the matter…

Being aware of that, I lowered my voice a little as I proposed, "If you could tell me her number, then I'll send it."

Yuigahama's eyes rose from the blank screen of her phone to me, and then she puffed up her cheeks. "Hikki, you don't have LINE."

"Ngh." As expected of modern youth, their methods of contact are too high tech… Oh, I want to use PreCure stamps as much as anyone, you know? But there aren't enough people for me to keep in contact with, so not using it doesn't cause me any problems…

Oh, I do feel bad for leaving all communications to Yuigahama. But while I was worrying about that, she was starting to tap away on LINE when I heard some grumbling on the other side of the table.

"How the hell does this guy even function, not using LINE…?"

"He must be a primitive… A Chiba primitive…"

"He has such love for Chiba, he hasn't evolved at all since the Chibanian epoch. His geomagnetic polarity is still reversed, so he cannot use LINE or other messaging apps. He's still monkeying around on his phone-carrier e-mail address."

"That's not true at all. I use web mail and SMS like anyone else," I argued a bit more heatedly than I would have liked. The three guys did not seem convinced.

"I never use e-mail these days…"

"He's got to be from the Jomon period… Does he come from the Kasori Shell Mounds?"

"Herm, but the times have changed a tad. Let us begin Hachiman Postal!"

The three glasses crowd were all snickering. *I knew Hatano had a mouth on him, but Sagami can be nasty, too. His sister is a little cuter… Lol nope.*

Whoops, this isn't the time to be giving these guys my attention.

When I glanced over, like, *All right then, how is that message going?* Yuigahama was mumbling as her fingers tapped and swiped.

"Ummm…so then what should I ask?" she said.

"For now, attach the prom proposal as a file and say we want to

have a meeting about it as soon as possible. Offer today, tomorrow, or the day after as dates."

"File…attach. Attach…?"

Yuigahama chanted File Attach! …But it missed! Yuigahama is confused!

It does sound like Fire Attack, though, I'll admit. But silly ol' Yuigahama, it seems she doesn't quite understand how she might attach a file! I'm not even sure she knows what *attach* means…

At this point, Sagami the younger could no longer bear to stand by and watch. He pushed up his glasses and asked with mild politeness, "Oh, you have to upload it to the *cloud* first. What are you using for *storage*?"

"Suto…reeji…?" Yuigahama repeated the English term with a shake of her head.

Breathing out a big *agh*, Hatano shook his head. "This isn't gonna work. She doesn't get it at all… Are you going to upload it to Dropbox or something?"

"Herm… Would a file transfer not be easier to understand? One may simply send the URL." Zaimokuza folded his hands and tilted his head.

"Ahhh, yeah." I snapped my fingers. "I'm borrowing the computer," I said, drawing the UG Club laptop toward me over the table. With a *tata-tap*, I uploaded the proposal document to a file transfer service and issued a URL. While I was at it, I also wrote out a line asking about their schedule and sent it to Yuigahama.

"You can just *copy-paste* this," I said.

"O-okay…I get *copy-paste*…" Yuigahama smiled, then started tapping on her phone again. We watched her do that. Eventually, she breathed a tired *phew*.

"Were you able to send it?" I asked.

"Yeah, basically…" Yuigahama combed at her bun shyly, and everyone smiled and nodded at each other with satisfaction. *What's this "princess of a male* otaku *club" feeling here…? Just now, even Zaimokuza was attempting to be useful… What a fearsome girl this Gahama is…*

But anyway! Right now, we were waiting for a response.

Meanwhile, I spent my time checking over the website Hatano and Sagami were working on, playing the client from hell: *It's looking great! It's looking great, but I also kinda want to see three more variations! It's okay if it takes until Monday!*

Eventually, Yuigahama's phone vibrated.

"It's them?" I asked.

"Mm, no. It's Yumiko. Asking what time today." She brought the phone softly to her lips and looked at me.

Oh, so it's about modeling for the photo shoot… "Sunset is around five thirty, so I guess we meet up at four thirty. So, like, we get everything ready, then wait for the sunset as we do the shoot," I said.

"Mm, okay," said Yuigahama, typing up the reply. Keeping her in the corner of my eye, I glanced out the window.

The weather that day was sunny, just as the report had predicted the day before.

There were a few clouds, but that would make the sunset even prettier.

Glancing up at the inclining sun, I began getting ready for the shoot.

X X X

As the sun set, the wind on the beach grew even colder, and the scent of salt grew stronger. The peaceful, mild waves washed in and out, sparkling under the light with every surge.

Narrowing my eyes against the bright, burning red of the sunset, I dropped the bags I was carrying on the sandy beach with a *thump*. I made the gazebo near the top of the beach our waiting spot as I got things ready for the shoot.

I thudded down the tub and the multiple hot-water pots I'd borrowed from the school, plus the disposable heating pads I'd bought from a hundred-yen shop. People swam here in the summer, so there was a public shower nearby, but obviously we weren't going to use it at this time of year. So I'd brought the basin and hot water to wash off a little of the seawater and sand, if the girls got wet or dirty. We also needed hot water for serving warm drinks to our models, so I'd brought quite a bit.

Zaimokuza, who'd carried everything this far, seemed mildly disturbed. "What incredible potential you have as an assistant director…"

"Not at all. I would have liked some blankets or long down coats, if I could have gotten them."

That, or a campfire stand… Maybe I should finally start conditioning myself for solo camping. I mean, if I was sending these girls out into the raging winds, that level of preparation would be essential. I would have liked to be perfectly ready for the cold, but my time and funds were limited, after all.

At my comment about the coats, Zaimokuza immediately clenched the collar of his own. "I-I'm not giving you this!"

"I don't want it…" *I obviously don't want that. That goes double for the girls.*

Now how are our models doing? On the benches a ways away, I saw Yumiko Miura, constantly rubbing and hugging her arms to keep warm.

"Agh! It's so cold! Yui, gimme a hot pad, c'mon!"

"On your back? Or stomach?"

"Both!"

Miura flipped up the bottom of her blazer and exposed the back of her blouse, and Yuigahama stuck the hot pad right there. *There's something strangely naughty about that image. I feel like I've seen something I shouldn't… Not that it's gonna stop me from watching.*

Anyway, they were apparently done getting ready, too.

I asked Zaimokuza to handle carrying things, while I headed off toward Yuigahama and the girls with the camera. "Your help is appreciated. Thanks for today." I bowed my head casually.

"…What?" Miura seemed incredibly skeptical, staring at me like you'd stare at a muntjac in the city. *Come on, it's not that surprising; there's more muntjac in Chiba lately—there's too many, and people are always going "Oh! Deer!" and I wonder what I did wrong this time.*

"Thanks for having us." Next to her, Ebina waved a hand with a bright smile.

Miura froze for a moment but then snapped out of it. "…Ahhh, mm." She jerked her face away and glanced over at Yuigahama, but then she suddenly said, "Well, it's just 'cause Yui asked," as she boinged her curls. Maybe it was just the sunset, but her cheeks were kind of pink. *My, my, it seems as if you're a teensy bit shy there? Tee-hee-hee…*

But it wasn't the time to be enjoying such heartwarming scenes. The sunset wouldn't last forever. "Then can we get started?" I said.

"Ah, yeah." Yuigahama nodded back at me, then prompted Miura and Ebina to follow her a bit down the beach. I trailed after them, feeling the crisp sand underfoot.

Once they were down at the water's edge, I called out to them to stop for a moment, took a few steps back, and raised the camera.

First, I wanted to get a rough idea of the image I needed and get a sense for the composition.

I set the lens to a wide angle, capturing a big swath of the sunset, and focused slightly over the horizon. That pale boundary between the sky and ocean was sparkling with reflected light. The sandy beach lay in front of them, just growing dark, while the water's edge was beginning to ooze orange, and then the gradation was complete with the crimson melting between the clouds. I was capturing Miura's and Yuigahama's backs such that the right side of the camera screen was a little out of focus.

With the sunset in the background, even the way the two girls stood was unique.

Miura's hands were thrust into her coat pockets as she gazed out over the twilit sea, sighing with awe, while Yuigahama kept glancing back like she was concerned about me.

I snapped the shutter a bunch of times, waving them over to where I wanted them to stand or focusing on my own positioning. It was obviously cold this whole time, so I made sure they wore coats, and sweatpants under their skirts. …*This might be a thing, in its own way. Kinda like I've sneaked into a girl's school, you know!*

So I was thinking, peering through the finder, when Miura muttered, "Ugh, so cold," for my benefit and flicked a glare back at me. "Hikio, hurry up."

"Yes, ma'am…" I raised my camera once more.

The red glow of the sunset drew closer, seeping into the clouds.

I tried taking a bunch of test shots, but they were mediocre. I'd meant to make them the same as the reference photos, but the framing just wasn't working.

Girls in uniforms standing side by side on the coast in the sunset—it should have been the simplest thing in the world, but I couldn't pin it down. To put it bluntly, it was all blah. But I wanted to make the kind of thing you'd see in a pamphlet at HIS with text like *Trip to Hawaii!!* or a cover like *We were here*…

Camera in hand, I was twisting my brain when Ebina popped up from behind me. "Let me try," she said, immediately snatching the camera out of my grasp. "For this, you do it like this, here." She snapped the shutter a few times, then returned the camera to me.

I checked the previews and sure enough, she'd totally nailed the

composition I'd had in mind. "Ohhh, this looks kinda pro…"

"Right?" Ebina puffed out her chest with a smug chuckle. "Aaand next…," she said in a singsong tone, then trotted over to Yuigahama and Miura. Then she attacked the both of them with a cry, ripping off their coats and sweatpants.

"Hurr-hurr-hurr, let it happen, let it happen!"

"Hey, hey, hey! Ebina, you jerk!" As Miura resisted, Ebina kept coming after her, pulling off her shoes, then trying to get her socks off, too. Is she Datsue-ba? A scene like something out of "Rashomon" was unfolding right in front of me.

"I'll take them off myself! I got it, okay?!" Yuigahama flailed and scampered away, pulling off her shoes and socks and tossing them aside. Miura's resistance was in vain as Ebina shoved her down and yanked her socks right off.

Thereupon I was humbly witness to Miura's exalted legs. I may have also borne witness to a flash of what was under her skirt, but I instantly jerked my face aside and snapped the shutter. *It's not like that! My fingers just, like, happened to go* snap, snap. *Reflexes, you know.*

"It's cold!" Yuigahama hopped around on the spot, while Miura shivered, confused by this fresh surprise.

"Eek! Huh?! The sand's so cold!"

"Tee-hee-hee, if you're in uniform on the beach, you've really got to be barefoot!" With a satisfied *meh-heh-heh*, Ebina pattered back toward me. While I was nodding with understanding, Ebina extended a hand. It seemed she was going to take pictures for me. Excellent. It's best to leave this sort of thing to someone with taste!

When I obediently handed over the camera, Ebina complained a bit about strobe daylight synchro and subject depth or whatever as she raised the camera. “Okayyy, cheese!” she called out, and the other two girls stood still on the beach.

Perhaps because of the cold, they huddled together, and Yuigahama suddenly grabbed Miura’s hand. It seemed they were quietly discussing something, but because of the distance and the wind, I couldn’t catch it.

But those secretive smiles were beautiful enough to make my heart stutter.

The instant when day ends and night begins is so fleeting—maybe this was one of those moments.

As I was caught entranced, Ebina let out a little *phew* and lowered the camera. “We’ll take the rest more casually, so just have fun and do what you want!” she yelled to the other girls before returning the camera to me. So I needed to take over from here. If she was gonna tell me *Don’t stop the camera!* then I had no choice but to obey, snap-snapping as the girls ran around messing with each other.

“Yui, I’ll get wet! I’ll get wet! Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap!”

“Wait, wait!” Miura and Yuigahama rushed up to the water’s edge, and when the waves approached, they ran away shrieking.

“Hmm, that’s a nice shot…” Beside me was Ebina, who had started taking more pictures with her phone.

“Uh, I invited you so that you would be in some of these,” I said.

Keeping her eyes on her phone, Ebina answered, “Come ooon. They’re all pretty and dressed up; they’re a great pairing. I’m not gonna make it anyone’s OT3.”

“Oh, I see…”

“Well, I think you and Hayato could be an option as subjects, though. Heh-heh-heh… And then you and Hayato…” With a terrifying smile—a slasher smile, if you will—Ebina chuckled at me.

“I think this is sexual harassment,” I said, moving precisely three steps away.

Puffing out her chest, Ebina declared, “It’s okay. I’m not very sexy. I don’t even understand what sexual harassment from someone with no sex appeal would be.”

“Uh, you’re making it kinda hard to answer… Is that not also sexual harassment?” I’d never thought of Ebina that way, so it was difficult to answer. Except I’ve actually just started thinking of her like that right now, though!

Anyway, I still don’t know the correct response when a girl says something like *I’m just not cute, you know*. I think the majority of the time, they’re trying to get a *That’s not true at all!* out of you, but when it came to Hina Ebina here, I had the feeling she wasn’t the type.

When I failed to respond, Ebina turned her gaze to the horizon. Then she carefully pressed down the seat of her skirt as she squatted, leaning her chin on her knees as she muttered, “…That sort of thing is a hassle.”

“What sort of thing?”

“Like romance, or love, or sex.”

“Ah, I guess… I don’t really want to talk about that sort of thing, though. Too embarrassing.” I wound up looking away. Hearing her say that so openly, in such a serious tone, was so awkward. And that wasn’t even getting into how this discussion was not purely theoretical, but an actually real thing to me. It wasn’t a topic I would like to talk about voluntarily.

But when I answered, Ebina’s shoulders quavered in laughter. “Don’t you think that’s *why* we can talk about that stuff? Because we’re not interested?”

“…Well, true.” If she was going to put it that way, I wouldn’t say no.

In a way, I trusted how Hina Ebina distanced herself. She kept it easy—not so far as to be a stranger, not close enough to be a friend, never breaking in her stance of acquaintance or neighbor.

With no intention of ever closing that distance, Ebina continued talking on her own. “Well, won’t things work out somehow?”

Her answer was so vague and unspecific, it felt like it would be rude not to answer, so I asked briefly, “What will?”

“Because in the end, you’re different from me, Hikigaya.”

I remembered hearing that cool tone a number of times. I couldn’t see her eyes, fixed on Miura and Yuigahama, but behind those lenses, I’m sure her eyes were like the deep ocean.

“…Did you hear something?” I asked.

Ebina finally glanced over to me. “From who? About what?” Her cool eyes didn’t reflect the color of the sunset. Her lips widened

teasingly, and it was a bit uncomfortable.

I gave her a casual shrug, then dropped my eyes to the camera in my hands. “Oh, it’s nothing, never mind,” I said to avoid the issue.

Ebina turned back to the water’s edge again, to Yuigahama and Miura running around like puppies. “…It’s obvious anyway, you know. I think I’m sort of involved in it, too. The rest, I guess I just kind of heard about from Yui.”

So she did hear about it after all…

Was this why she’d gone to the trouble to come talk to me? I didn’t know exactly what she’d heard, but I couldn’t bring myself to be interested in prying.

But it bothered me a little that it was so transparent. I don’t think I’m such a simple person, and it annoys me that someone would understand this situation so easily. I was doing this after some decent consideration of the matter, so that flippant comment and know-it-all expression didn’t sit well with me.

Still, they do say a third party can have a better perspective on things. More often than you think, someone else will see your situation better than you. And if that someone else was Hina Ebina, then all the more so.

I put on a bit of a poker face and pretended to fiddle with the camera, asking my question in a more roundabout way. “…Can everyone tell that sort of thing?” I didn’t want to seem too deeply interested.

“Obviously, Hayato can, right? And you know Tobecchi—he’s not interested in anything else to begin with. And Yumiko…let’s not go there.”

“Huh? The hell, that’s kinda scary…” My poker face evaporated as I turned toward Ebina.

She was wearing a meaningful little smile but then tucked it away to give me a sidelong glance. “I don’t know how we got here, and it’s not something for me to say…but, like, isn’t there an easier way?” she said.

I had to crack a wry smile at that. Someone had been telling me just that. Maybe everyone.

I’m sure if there were one word, that would be enough, and that would be the end of it.

But I couldn’t allow it to be something so easy.

“Simple things are the hardest. It’s just that this was the easiest

for me," I said.

Ebina's head turned around to stare at me. "Hmm. That's kinda creepy," she said ruthlessly, with utter disinterest.

"…Ah, yeah." My shoulders slumped. I knew she was right, though, so I wouldn't complain about that.

But the apparent antipathy in Ebina's words was nowhere to be seen in her faint smile. "Well, it's not like I don't get it. I don't mind—it's just, like, pessimism?"

I nodded back wordlessly, then looked to the water, where the setting sun glistened.

There was probably something similar in how we thought. I could sympathize with the way she tacked on excuses about herself being rotten or whatever to cover things up. If I were to interpret my own behavior like she did, I would call it something akin to pessimism. I won't say that was right, but it wasn't wildly off, either. It's that slight disparity that makes me feel certain.

Hina Ebina and I are different, after all. Although we sympathize, we don't come to the same conclusion. In a way, it reminds me of the distance between me and Hayato Hayama.

Even if we're similar, even if we're close, even if we appear the same, we are unique. I think I've been learning and relearning that, over the course of this past year.

Most likely, it's been the same with me and someone else, too.

Instead of correcting Ebina, I chose silence. It wasn't something to bother correcting with words at this point.

The sound of a few gleeful voices joined the roar of the ocean.

"Ebinaaaa! Photooos!"

"Let's take some together!"

At the water's edge, Miura and Yuigahama waved their arms wide, calling out for Ebina. White puffs rose from their lips from all that running around, their cheeks red, but they didn't look cold—in fact, that was the one place that looked warm.

"Comiiing!" Ebina rose to her feet, glancing at me, then at the camera in my hands. Hooking her evenly cut, shoulder-length hair behind her ears, she smiled as if to say, *If you would be so kind*, and immediately pattered off.

I watched her go, then raised the camera.

X X X

The morning after finishing the shoot was sunny, just like the day before.

The sun was high in the sky, the light shining through the gaps between the curtains to slowly heat my eyelids.

On that day, March 3, there were ten more days left until the Saturday of the graduation ceremony.

And that was also the birthday of the greatest little sister in the world, Komachi Hikigaya.

But despite that, my plans were packed full from morning to evening.

Normally, I would have liked to get Komachi a present that was both moderately priced and full of love, then have a big celebration, but with everything involving the dummy prom over the last few days, I'd been putting it all off. *Ugh, work… Yuck…*, I thought, ready to spill all my bitterness and woe as per usual, but for once, I'd actually signed up for this. So I swallowed that down and scolded myself instead, jumping out of bed. I was doing this of my own accord, so complaining would not be productive. I was my own employer, so all my complaining, whining, and moaning would come back on myself. That's the tough thing about self-employment.

The exhaustion of going day after day seemed to be catching up with me. I tried to get my brain slowly moving, struggling through a heavy fog as I headed for the washroom. Despite the calendar days moving along, the water I splashed on my face to force my eyes open didn't seem to be getting any warmer.

Glancing at the clock, I saw it was a bit past nine in the morning. I had to hurry, or I'd be late for our meeting. I ran up the stairs into my room, pulled a uniform off the hanger and shoved my arms through the sleeves, and, with my bag in my arms, pattered down the stairs again.

I wanted to say something to Komachi before I left the house, so I peeked into the living room to see her still in her pajamas, legs in the *kotatsu* as she zoned out watching TV.

It seemed our parents were still fast asleep, and aside from Komachi, Kamakura was also in the living room in the sunny spot by the window, making snuffling noises.

"Hey, I'm going out…," I called while putting on my coat.

"Uh-huh. See you later!" Komachi didn't even look at me, fluttering a hand as Kamakura smacked at the floor with his tail.

It was a scene just like any weekend. Considering it was her birthday, Komachi didn't seem very moved by any of this. Meanwhile, I was nothing but moved. With this much moving going on, I could generate enough power for a whole city! Though this is moving us away from the point!

But no matter how emotional I was, I just wasn't prepared to celebrate Komachi's birthday. These days, even dinner table conversation was being polluted by work, and I hadn't managed to ask Yuigahama about Komachi's birthday present like I'd wanted to, either.

Even if I were going to celebrate it after I got home, I didn't have the time, money, or mental capacity. Maybe Komachi wasn't bothered about it, but personally, I'd feel uncomfortable if I didn't say something.

After clearing my throat with a *gfum, gfum*, I muttered, "Uhhh… happy birthday, Komachi." *I'll get shy if I say it to her face, so it's a good thing she's turned the other way…*, I was thinking when she flopped down onto the ground.

Then she rolled over and, on her stomach, leaned her chin in her hands and chuckled. "Meh-heh-heh. Thanks, Bro!" Just a moment ago, she'd been facing away from me, and it had seemed as if she wasn't listening at all, but when I actually congratulated her, she acted all bashful and happy. It was so cute, I couldn't help but smile. Then she snorted. "Heh-hmph."

…*Snorted?* When I gave her a questioning look, she elaborated. "Acting cool like it's the same as usual, but then showing you I'm happy when you say it to me…that was worth a lot of Komachi points."

Indeed, if she hadn't revealed her secret, it would have scored even higher… However, I know this is Komachi's first-rate way of hiding her shyness. That made what came next a little hard to say. "So about today…"

"Mm, I know, it's okay." Komachi gave a little nod and cracked a smile. "Yui's waiting, right? Hurry and go."

"…How do you know about that?" I asked, semi–freaked out. *I haven't told her anything about my plans today, though…*

She pulled her phone to her and waved it at me. "She sent me a birthday message at midnight, and then we started chatting."

"I—I see…"

Komachi had said it like it was nothing, but this was a little

terrifying to me. It's scary to have your behavior communicated to your little sister through an alternate route. Isn't it? *Wait, that Miss Gahama sure tells Komachi at lot, doesn't she? At some point, though, I'd like to confirm just how far that network goes…* But I didn't want to ask in the wrong way and bring more trouble on myself, either. The heart of a man is so complicated!

As I was groaning, Komachi puffed out her chest, held up a finger, and chuckled smugly at me. "I'm glad to celebrate my birthday and get presents and stuff, but we can do all that later, with everyone together."

"…Ah, yeah," I answered as the thought hit me.

Everyone, huh? I basically understood who she was referring to. I just wasn't at all certain I could make that happen for her.

Komachi must have been suspicious of how my voice wilted, as she gazed up at me, cheeks in her hands. I got the sense she was examining me somehow. Our eyes met, and a pathetic, bitter smile came to my face.

Then, with just a hint of a shrug, Komachi muttered, "…Well, even if it's not everyone, that's okay, too. Even if it's just you, worst case, I'll still count it. Barely."

The warmth in her tone eased my tension, so there was a bit of a smile in my voice as I replied, "Worst case… Wait, just barely?"

"I mean that anything's fine. Anyway, you can't make Yui wait." As if to say, *Go on, go, go*, she shooed me out with little hand motions before flopping herself down again. And then she let out a faint sigh, as if she was trying to smother it.

With her in the corner of my eye, I left the living room.

X X X

Since I was late leaving the house, I gave up going by bike and decided to take the train and bus. Paging through the materials on the train, I prepared for the meeting.

Fortunately, Yuigahama's negotiations had helped get this meeting arranged quickly. I wasn't thrilled about talking with Tamanawa, but I told myself that this was just work. At the moment, I was flipping through a book on business terminology to help me speak his language a bit better.

Eventually, I arrived at the station closest to my goal and

hurried on foot to our meeting location, the community center.

It would have been easier to do it at school, but outsiders generally aren't allowed on the premises. You could get in if you went through the proper procedures, but not being on the student council, it'd be kind of hard for me to make that happen. On the other hand, meeting at a café would be too casual. Since we were going to upload a photo of the meeting to social media, it would be preferable to have it someplace that felt somewhat official. *Every little bit of realism is gonna help…*, I thought, walking along, when my phone vibrated.

Looking at it, I saw I'd gotten an e-mail from Yuigahama. The text read only, *Are you gonna be a while?* I thought this was unusual for her, since she usually sent longer messages, and I replied with *I'm almost there*.

I was actually coming up to the community center now. I checked around by the entrance, but I couldn't find Yuigahama. It seemed she'd gone inside ahead of me.

Trotting briskly up the steps, I headed for the small meeting room I'd reserved. I could faintly hear Orimoto's voice coming from what seemed like the correct room—without even checking the plate, I could tell this was it. I knocked, then opened the door right away.

And then I found Yuigahama already there, with Tamanawa and Orimoto sitting opposite her.

"Ohhh, Hikigaya, it's been while." Extremely at ease, Orimoto fluttered a casual wave, while beside her, Tamanawa had his arms folded. He blew his bangs upward and gave me a look.

I gave him a casual bow and a "'Sup" in return, pulling out the chair by Yuigahama. Though she didn't say anything out loud, she formed a *Yahallo* with her lips. It must have been too embarrassing to say that in front of other people. However, it's also embarrassing having other people seeing such a secretive exchange!

To cover that feeling, I whispered in her ear, "Weren't we supposed to meet up?"

"Hmm… Um, we ran into each other by the entrance, and then she was like, 'It's cold, so let's wait inside…'" Yuigahama combed at her bun awkwardly with a forced smile.

Orimoto had probably approached Yuigahama in her usual casual way, and then swept her inside by force of gradual erosion, leading Yuigahama to spend a slightly awkward time with two

people she didn't know very well until I got here… *Aw man! Sorry!*

"Oh, okay… Like, sorry," I said with a bow of my head, and Yuigahama shook her head with a little smile.

It seemed Orimoto was watching this exchange, as she brought her hands together with a particularly loud *kasmack*. "Ahhh, sorry! Yuigahama was trying to wait for you, but I went and invited her in. It was cold outside, so I thought it'd be okay."

That straightforward apology was… Well, it was very Orimoto. She'd always been like that—either she didn't concern herself with maintaining distance, or she knew but still tried to come closer anyway.

"O-oh… No, it's totally fine," I said.

Yuigahama nod-nodded, smiling brightly at Orimoto. "Y-yeah! I was cold, too, so it's totally fine!"

"Oh, all right, then…" With a similar sort of smile to smooth things over, Orimoto combed her hand through her loose, mussy perm.

A-awkward moment… Normally, I get, like, *Whoa…* just from seeing Orimoto, but being in a room with both her and Yuigahama, it was like, *Wo-wo-whoa-wo whoa-wo-wo*. I almost expected someone to fire off a *shinken* in there.

Though Yuigahama and Orimoto both had light smiles on their faces, I couldn't read into what lay behind them.

The weirdly suffocating silence continued until Orimoto suddenly sighed. "Anyway, why didn't *you* call us, Hikigaya? When I got that message from Yuigahama, I totally freaked out." She glared at me, sounding annoyed but with a joking air.

That softened the atmosphere, allowing me to find my voice. "Ahhh, well, I got a new phone a while back, so, y'know?" I muttered under my breath. Of course I couldn't say to her face that I'd erased her number.

Orimoto seemed to interpret that in her own way. "Yeah, yeah. Ahhh, I did change my phone e-mail address, after all. How about I give you my LINE ID?"

"I don't have LINE."

"That's hilarious, oh-em-gee. That's like an excuse a girl would say."

"Uh, it's not hilarious. The way girls reject you is pretty crazy…" *If she's bringing that up as an example, does that mean that happens to her sometimes…? Oh, was it the girl who was with her that*

time with Hayama? Nakamachi! I get that; she had that kind of vibe. Rude as it may be, I was connecting the dots, while on her end, Orimoto was tilting her head.

"Huhhh, so then what do we do?" Staring off in the other direction, she poked herself in the cheek with her phone.

Meanwhile, Tamanawa kept blowing up his bangs, occasionally clearing his throat with a *goff, goff*. And he was still glaring daggers at me.

Sensing he might have something to say, I cleared my throat back at him to end my exchange with Orimoto. I rummaged around inside my bag. "Well, that can all come later… Today, I came here as an agent—well, maybe representative—of our president." I pulled out the reason I'd brought them here that day, the proposal documents for the dummy prom. The file had already been sent to Tamanawa and Orimoto, but when you have a meeting, you make printouts, too. This is the iron law of the corporate slave! What was up with that push for going paperless…?

"We're planning a prom right now, but we're also thinking to scale it up down the line. Not right away, but when it comes to next year and moving forward…," I said, and beside me, Yuigahama blinked with surprise. I nodded back at her.

On our end, we were planning the dummy prom for this year's graduation, but that was just for Soubu High School. In fact, there was no clear time frame, like this year or next year, indicated on the website we were setting up. It was only ever labeled as the "new prom."

They would never expect we'd attempt to go through with such a preposterous plan this year. If we had some more time for it, that would make it easier to get them to agree to it. There was no need to bother telling them everything.

However, those certain carping parents from Soubu High School had nothing beyond this year's prom in their heads. So if a new prom plan came up, of course they'd assume it was this year when they considered it. Take a prom they already didn't like and make it even bigger, and they'd be desperate to crush it.

And neither Orimoto nor Tamanawa seemed particularly concerned about the time of year when I mentioned it; they'd assumed all along that I meant the following year.

Orimoto picked up the proposal papers and made a lazy *uh-huhhh*. "Mm, this thing, huh?"

The cover of the proposal documents Orimoto was flipping through was emblazoned with rows of the aforementioned incomprehensible terminology, printed in an extra-cool font. Still, I was thinking, *But Tamanawa, though! Tamanawa will get it!* as I reached for my one ray of hope, glancing over at him.

Tamanawa thoroughly examined each individual sheet of the proposal, occasionally stopping and frowning when he came upon a line that took his interest. And then he let out a heavy sigh.

Eventually, he finished perusing it, carefully closed the documents, and set his gaze on me. "…I read your proposal," he said, tap-tapping the table with his fingers at a slow tempo. He blew up his bangs again. "Making allowances for diversity is a good thing. But I think everything else might be too abstract. There's too much fluff, and the plan in general is off focus."

I was so shocked, my mouth dropped open, aghast. "What…did you say…?"

Tamanawa…isn't using…pretentious business English…?

While I was still reeling, Tamanawa kept on talking. "I think you should take more care in communicating your ideas. I suppose you call it the visualization of a proposal. Of course I can understanding setting your eye on the future prospects for this kind of experience-oriented event, but your reasoning up to that point doesn't stand." Tamanawa chided me over every detail, moving his hands in wide, gentle motions like tai chi, finishing with a sweep of his bangs. "That's why your proposal is no good." I could read the silent, pitying message in Tamanawa's eyes: *You're still at that stage, huh?*

I can't believe it… I made eye contact with Yuigahama to ask, *Was he always like this…?*

She replied with a little shake of her head that said, *Dunno. I've never cared enough to notice.*

At a loss, I finally shot Orimoto a reserved sort of look to see her scratching her cheek with a wry smile. What I inferred from her expression was that this, apparently, was Tamanawa these days.

Well, these pretentious types have been societally ridiculed for various things for a long time now. Maybe even Tamanawa had picked up on that trend and was trying to turn over a new leaf. You could say he'd grown, in a sense. *Well, they do say a boy will grow so much in three days, you won't even recognize him the next time you see him… That really is true with this guy… But if I let Tamanawa continue*

to control this conversation, I'll drop dead screaming.

But this isn't the time to be impressed. If Tamanawa won't get in on this, then my plans will fall apart.

In my panic, I was also unconsciously bouncing my leg. Tamanawa slowly, slowly tap-tapped on the table, as if waiting for my reply. Yuigahama glanced between me and Tamanawa anxiously, letting out little sighs each time, and Orimoto smothered her snickers.

All these sounds came together to force a sort of dissonant track. Its rhythm and beat pushed my anxiety even harder, and I opened my mouth with no idea what was going to come out. I just had to say something.

I was rattling off absolutely everything I could think of practically like freestyling. There's an abnormal affinity between pretentious-type vocabulary and Japanese rap. "Is your problem with our plan just no budget? Our team takes pride in doing more with less. What we gotta use is a cool gadget—scalability is our best bet." With no care to the meter or the flow, I tossed out a random verse, as Tamanawa listened, nodding rhythmically.

And then, spinning his hands around, he shot back at me without missing a beat, "The title of your plan is absolutely frivolous—the content inside's superficial and ridiculous. If we're going to start it out, you and me and all of us, we need specificity, or it'll be disastrous. Without directionality, it's awfully egregious! Without some answers here for me, this whole proposal's gone to dust, and that's something we all need to discuss." Tamanawa orated coolly and eloquently.

Though I could hardly think of what to say, I shot back, "We made that draft with great consideration—we just need hands and then your reputation. I'll admit the direction's still vague, but at the end of the day, your key takeaway is this idea's Lincoln's play. We're birds leaving the nest, putting ourselves to the test. But we need leaders—the very best—to come up with the next step. For the budget, we leverage crowdfunding. It'll be easy with that innovation."

As I was wiping the sweat off my forehead, Tamanawa's eyebrows jumped up, but he was coolly listening. He paused a beat to check that I was done talking, flipped through the proposal papers, then smack-smacked over the parts that had the pretentious business lingo I'd poured into it to use on him.

“It’s true, I’m interested in what you’ve got. But look, your language leaves me distraught. The only part of your plan that matters is this page here, in this one spot. Everything else you’ve written down reads like a satirical potshot. If we’re going to do this together, then we’re all in the same pot. But right now, we’re oil and water, are we not?” Now even faster than before, he spun his hands around, then suddenly jabbed a finger gun at me.

His gaze was piercing for such a joking gesture, and it made my words catch in my throat. It was true, as Tamanawa said, that this proposal had underestimated him. I hadn’t been thinking deeply when I’d written it. I’d assumed that if I just flung out something with popular business terminology, he’d jump right on it.

But people do change. This was Tamanawa, the guy who’d gotten criticized point-blank by Yukinoshita during the Christmas event—he would have room for change.

“Uh, well, um…,” I started to say, then gave up.

I’ve had enough. I’ve got nothing more to say. He’s really good at this. I can’t. He’s too powerful…

When I let out a deep sigh in acknowledgment of my defeat, Tamanawa smiled victoriously. “And that’s why your proposal is unacceptable.”

“Ngh.” He was being so blunt again that I was choking up. Under the eight-bar two-turn rule, the critical hit knocked me out before I even got to round three.

As I hung my head, it seemed Yuigahama, who’d been watching this whole mess, could no longer stand by and do nothing; she hesitantly opened her mouth with a combination of awkwardness and exasperation. “Ummm… What should we do…?”

Then Orimoto, who’d been trying so hard not to snicker, wiped the tears that had beaded in the corners of her eyes and sighed deeply. Then she picked up the proposal. “Still, this looks pretty fun, doesn’t it?” she said to Yuigahama.

Yuigahama’s eyes lit up. “Yeah! Right, right?”

Orimoto didn’t seem to mean anything by that remark, just amusing herself—but the moment Tamanawa heard it, he immediately smiled his most dashing smile, snapped his fingers, and winked while he was at it. “Indeed! That’s also a good point.”

“Uhhh…?” Tamanawa had been rejecting us out of hand until just a second ago; the flip-flopping was intense. I made a mostly voiceless sound and stared at him.

Unsurprisingly, this seemed to make him uncomfortable, and he cleared his throat with a quiet *hem*, dropping his gaze to the proposal papers once more. “Of course, it’s not as if we’re against this proposal. It’s just that misunderstandings will always crop up when the initial consensus building doesn’t go well. I think we should ensure we have a solid foundation first,” Tamanawa said with a glance toward me.

I nodded back at him. “Think of this plan as a jumping-off point. I just wanted to fancy it up a little. I’m sorry if that made it hard to understand. So then couldn’t we leave aside feasibility to talk it over again, from square one?” Placing my hands on my lap, I lowered my head at him just the slightest bit.

Yuigahama followed my lead. “W-we’re counting on you…”

With a *hmm*, Tamanawa regarded us with deep interest, and Orimoto blinked her wide eyes. There was a dubious silence, and I squirmed.

But then Orimoto breathed out a quiet *huhhh*, almost a chuckle. “…Why not? Let’s give it a shot, President.” Then she jabbed at Tamanawa’s arm with her elbow. With each jab, Tamanawa made weird sounds like *ngh* and *hnn*.

Hmm, I get that feeling. Back in middle school, that kind of physical contact made me feel like I was gonna die…

Tamanawa writhed tortuously for a while, but he eventually collected himself, rubbing at the places Orimoto had prodded him. “…All right. Fortunately, we have lots of time, so there’s plenty of room to look into it. In the meantime, we have to make sure to arrange a common awareness of our goal, in aim toward actualization.”

“That’s it!” Orimoto fired a thumbs-up.

That must have put Tamanawa in a good mood, as he suddenly broke into a smile, stroked his chin, and folded his fingers to lean forward. “And speaking of goals, let me tell you a story. A long time ago, there was a town with three bricklayers… When someone asked them what they were doing, what do you think they answered?” Tamanawa snapped his fingers and pointed at me. He was getting into his groove—he’d brought up a business exemplum he’d heard somewhere and was now trying to get me to answer it.

However, sadly, when I’d been writing the proposal, I’d gone over a bunch of these stories. “I’m making a great cathedral that will last for generations,” I smoothly replied. *Sorry, dude, but I had*

to say the right answer.

Tamanawa responded with an easygoing nod. “That’s right. He answered, ‘I’m laying bricks.’ And then if you asked the next one, what do you think he answered?” This time he snapped the fingers of both hands and pointed at me.

Yuigahama was staring dubiously back at Tamanawa. But I shook my head to tell her not to worry about it. If you let him get to you, you’ve lost the game.

While knowing Tamanawa wouldn’t hear me, I repeated the same answer again. “…I’m making a great cathedral that will last for generations.”

“That’s right. He answered, ‘I’m working.’ …And then the third one…” Tamanawa’s gaze swept over all three of us, and then after a pregnant pause, he opened his mouth to say majestically, “… answered, ‘We’re making a great cathedral that will last for generations.’”

“Uh…uh-huh…” Seeing Tamanawa and his sparkling eyes, I had no more words. All I could do was be surprised.

However he took my reaction, he breathed a sigh of extreme satisfaction. “We should carefully consider what our goal is.” His chair scraped as he stood up, and he turned halfway back to us. “Do you know how to beat Destiny Land?” Without waiting for a reply, Tamanawa started pacing around the room, shoes tapping loudly. “Normally, it can’t be done, because Destiny Land has attained an incredibly high level of perfection. So we turn that idea on its head. We make something imperfect—there’s entertainment value to be had there.”

Eventually, after about a total of two circles of the meeting room, Tamanawa came up in front of the whiteboard. And then he started to draw a mystery graph on the board. “You should consider which of two tests would make you happier—the one where you can always get ninety percent, or the test where you got zero before, but this time, you were able to get fifty. What you must ask is not how we can invite ten thousand people, but what we can do to make it with ten thousand people.” Tamanawa smacked the whiteboard.

Yuigahama was getting swept up in his energy, as she applauded and made impressed sounds. “Ohhh, I kinda get it, I think…s-sort of…,” she added in a mutter, sneaking her gaze away from my suspicious glare.

Meanwhile, Orimoto nodded, hands both moving on her phone. “I get that! That’s it!”

Yeah, she’s not listening…, I thought, but it was true that Tamanawa wasn’t wildly wrong. There was some logic in what he was saying, and yeah, that is a thing that happens, but…but still, the “I don’t want to hear it from you” feeling is so powerful… When a pretentious type experiences growth, maybe the place they ultimately arrive at is IT type. It kinda feels like when you roll for the IT CEO gacha and you wind up with a 1-star.

The leopard may have stopped using overwrought English terms, but he hasn’t changed his spots, huh…?

This sort of thing is typical on the Inage coast. It lacked novelty to me, but I think it was proof of his growth.

As I was pondering this, Tamanawa’s dramatic speechifying had ended, and now he was studying the whiteboard. “…Let’s start preparing seriously for it now, setting our sights on next year and after. We have to accumulate results one by one.” And then when he turned back to us, there was a slightly aged, harsh smile on his face.

Tamanawa must have realized the emptiness of his own words. That was why, though he still continued to borrow the words of someone else, he nevertheless continued to hope. When actions and results came along with it, the things he said would surely become Tamanawa’s words for real. There is hope for his future!

Though last time had been a disaster, this time, I was glad we could team up with Tamanawa. Not just as an important factor in the dummy prom—he would also be a strong ally in the proms Isshiki would actually be holding the following year and onward. Kaihin represent! My man! My bro! Pics with the homies!

“…Mind if I take a photo of the meeting?” I said. “Also, I’d like to put it on the website, if I could.”

“Of course, I don’t mind. Ohhh, then maybe it would be best to write this up so it’s a bit easier to understand.” Tamanawa agreed readily with a sunny expression.

Then he made some additions to the whiteboard, talking about this and that while kneading the air with his hands. He made me think of spinning a pottery wheel. I snapped some photos of him like that.

And then, once we’d gone a little over the time allotted for the meeting room, Tamanawa’s lecture finally ended. By the time we

left the community center, the sun was already high in the sky, with the afternoon bustle filling the city.

Stepping out into the throng in front of the station, Orimoto spun back to us. “What are you doing after this? Going back? Going out for food or something?”

“Ah, we’ve got some things to do at school…,” Yuigahama said in an apologetic tone.

Orimoto’s eyebrows went into an upside-down V. “Oh…then we’ll go to eat another time.”

Yuigahama put her hands together and bowed, and I bobbed my head along with her.

Then Tamanawa cleared his throat experimentally before taking a step up beside Orimoto. “Well, that’s it for today. So then, since you and I have a little extra time right now, Orimoto, if you’d like…,” he muttered, cheeks pinkening as he gave Orimoto a sidelong probing glance. Though he started off strong, his voice petered out over time.

Whether Orimoto was listening or not, she nodded back with a nonchalant expression. “Uh-huh, let’s go home.”

“O-okay…,” Tamanawa managed to reply, lips spasming. He immediately collected himself and strode up to me, blowing his bangs off his forehead. “…Once you’ve decided on your plans for next time, circle back to touch base with me.”

I frankly had no such plans, but he was so intense that all I could do was nod.

I dunno, but…do your best, Tamanawa!

X X X

The school building on the weekend was deserted, and it was as if all the sounds were echoing through the void.

Many sounds filled the outside area, sports field included, and as we stepped into the school building, it had a cold, rejecting feeling.

Meanwhile, the UG Club room was as tense as a gambling den.

“…All riiight, we’re done!” Hatano pressed the Enter key with a final *taaan*, then immediately flopped facedown on the desk, while Sagami’s exhausted little brother pushed the laptop toward me.

“This is the test app, basically…”

Peering at the computer, I saw the website was complete, just about entirely as per specifications. It had a stylish-looking photo bam in the middle as the main visual, with the text information written small, and then embedded social media accounts. It was little more than a teaser site, but it was impressive they'd finished all this over just these past few days.

"Try posting something, Zaimokuza," I said.

"Mm-hmm… Aaand click!" With that cry, Zaimokuza made a very cheery post dripping with hashtags. Upon refreshing the page, a message displayed in the embedded social media part that read, *We discussed the prom with Kaihin! And we'll be working with nearby schools in the future as well!* along with the freshly taken photo of Tamanawa spinning a steaming-hot pottery wheel.

"Wow, that's kinda cool. I like it!" Yuigahama, who'd been peeking in from behind me, smacked at my shoulder excitedly.

Feeling embarrassed by her proximity, I gently escaped from her hands as I returned the computer to Sagami. "Okay, then take it online. Zaimokuza, you handle social media updates for the time being."

"Roger."

"It's safe with me."

As Sagami and Zaimokuza were nodding back, one person—Hatano—was examining the screen with a complicated expression. "Is this okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, there's enough content," I told him.

Bringing up the exchange with Tamanawa as our track record while also implying we were going to other schools would make this difficult to ignore. And since the meeting with Kaihin was only described as an "discussion," once the dummy prom fizzled out, that should be enough to make excuses for it. This way, only the people who'd complained about the prom before would be overreacting to it.

Right as I was considering talking about this, Hatano tilted his head and squinted at me. "…No, I mean…isn't this a bit weak? There's not much to it."

"Well, yeah, but…it only needs to get found by certain parents. In fact, letting it get too well-known will make cleanup afterward a hassle. I think this is about perfect. Besides, I'll lay some insurance just in case to leak it to the parents, so we should get a reaction right away."

Although the trouble was with the one who'd be doing the leak… Thinking about the next job I had to do, a bitter sigh slipped out of me. Yuigahama examined me curiously.

To keep her from noticing too much, I followed up with "Sorry, but keep an eye on it just for today and tomorrow, to make sure there's nothing wrong with it."

Hatano nodded before turning back to the computer again to begin discussing what came next with Sagami.

Surveying everyone to see how they were all doing, I blew out a little breath.

Now most of the hard parts were done. This had been an express job, thrown together to meet an emergency, so the seams and rough spots would stand out, but we'd done our best. Well, I'd made them do their best. If we could just get through this weekend, then the rest would work out somehow. I had nothing but thanks for Zaimokuza and the UG Club.

"If all goes well, the results will be out by the end of the weekend… So thanks. You've been a big help." I could only say it quietly, which was pretty pathetic if I do say so myself, but still, I laid my hands on my knees and slowly bowed my head.

When I did that, Zaimokuza and the UG Club stared at me like I was an alien. But Yuigahama was smiling with satisfaction.

Their reactions were getting uncomfortable, so I cleared my throat. "Well, the thank-you will be down the road. Sorry for making you come on a weekend. You're free to finish up whenever's good for you… That's it for the day."

Immediately after I said that, I picked up my things and stood from my seat. The boss has to go home, or it's hard for everyone to leave, after all! What chic, gallant consideration. I'd like the bosses of the world to learn from my example.

"Ah, hey, wait… Th-thanks, guys! Let's have an after-party later!" Following my lead, Yuigahama also got up with a scrape of her chair. Then she pumped an arm energetically high.

Hatano and Sagami responded to that with vague smiles.

"Uh, well…"

"Ehhh, I'll think about it…"

"Aye. I'll just say I'll go if I can." Zaimokuza was the one person answering with energy. I feel like normally that's what you say when you *don't* go, but Zaimokuza seems like the only person who would, mysteriously enough…

With the sense of release and fulfillment of a job complete, the three guys started chatting lazily among themselves. Watching them out of the corner of my eye, Yuigahama and I left the UG Club room.

Unfortunately, my work was not yet done. I pulled my phone out of my pocket, tapping it as I walked. Beside me, Yuigahama was also on her phone, until she glanced over at me. “What are you doing after this, Hikki?” she asked. “Going home?”

“No…I’m making a call. Depends on that,” I said. The phone was still in my hand, and I had yet to hit the button. Seeing the address book displayed on the screen, I let out another long sigh.

I really should have called her earlier.

But the more you don’t want to call or e-mail, the more you put it off. That’s just how the world works. The psychology of a useless person dictates that you put off communications you feel discomfort or guilt over, such as progress reports or notifications you’ll be late, for example. And then as a result, you wind up right down to the wire, procrastinating and procrastinating, causing massive damage in the process. And yet I can’t seem to stop…

Only this time, there were no other options, so no matter how much I didn’t like it, I had no choice.

Yuigahama’s gaze alternated between me and my phone, as if she was suspicious of how I was scowling at it. “Call…who?”

“…Well, my connection who’s going to be our leak.” Coming from the special-use building to the aerial walkway that connected to the main school building, I finally found the resolve. Yuigahama’s obvious concern was gonna shore up my resolve.

With a long sigh, I glanced over at her. “…Sorry, I’ve got to make this call.”

“Uh-huh.”

Though my intention had been to suggest she go on without me, Yuigahama stopped right there like she was going to wait for me. *If she’s gonna do that, it makes it really hard to tell her to please leave…*

I was running out of options. I pointed to the bench in the aerial walkway, prompting her to sit down and wait, and pressed the Call button with my phone thumb.

The call sound rang two, three times, and the person on the other end quickly picked up. “Hya-hallooo. How are you?” The one I was speaking with, Haruno Yukinoshita, was as easygoing as if the

conversation the other day had never happened.

Hearing her voice, I could feel my face stiffening in real time. "…I'm good, thank you." The tension must have affected the pitch of my voice, as I heard an amused laugh from the other end. I hated it when she saw through me, and I continued rapidly in the hopes of dispelling the discomfort. "There's something I need to talk to you about—do you mind?"

"Of course it's okay. Lay it on me."

"I know this is sudden, but if you could do tonight…," I said, and I heard a thoughtful breath on the other end.

"Hmm…that really is sudden. It's fine, though. Can you come over to me? There's a café right here, by the entrance of the outlet mall," she replied immediately. I'd only managed to catch her off balance for the briefest moment, and I was a bit disgruntled about that.

"…Uh-huh, around that area?" I answered lazily as I vaguely thought about the place she'd indicated.

And then Yuigahama got up to come sneak her ear close to the phone, almost leaning on me. Her sudden approach startled me, and my heart jumped. I couldn't shake her off and immediately staggered away from her, but she made a huffy face and stepped right back up to me.

Suspicious about this silent conflict, Haruno called out to me through the phone, "Is something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing," I answered rapidly, covering the mouthpiece with my hand as I quietly told Yuigahama off. "…What? I'm on the phone right now, and—"

"Are you gonna meet with Haruno?" Yuigahama interrupted. Her tone was a bit sharper than usual, and darker.

I couldn't tease her or make a comeback, and all I could do was reply, briefly, "…Yeah. I was thinking I'd have her be the one to leak the website."

"Can't I come with you?" she said.

"Why…?" I asked, but Yuigahama pressed her lips together and gave me no answer. Her determined gaze told me that she was going, even if I said no.

Frankly speaking, I didn't really want her there. Whenever I met with Haruno Yukinoshita, it was always bad. I didn't want to drag Yuigahama into that.

But even as I was hesitating, I heard an irritated voice coming

from the phone: “Hellooo.” I hastily brought it to my ear.

“Ahhh, pardon… So Yuigahama and I will be coming.”

“Gahama-chan? Mm, okay,” Haruno answered casually, without any pause like she was considering. After that, we decided on a time and such, and then she hung up on me.

I let my arm holding the phone hang weakly as I looked at Yuigahama. She was squeezing the strap of her backpack, biting her lip.

“Let’s go…,” I said. A smile came to her face, and she nodded. But the footsteps that followed were much quieter and less cheery than usual.

So slow and quiet that you wouldn’t notice.

It was probably something like the sound of the end approaching.

X X X

The sun sank into the distant sea, only its lingering glow spreading over the western sky. The streetlamps and lights from buildings were all we had to see by as it gradually grew dark, throwing the shadows of the people on the streets in every direction.

The café Haruno had indicated was reasonably crowded, but the European-style chic of the interior and the quiet background music gave it a calm atmosphere.

When we let the staff know someone was waiting for us, we were shown to an open terrace. There were still cold winds this early in spring, so it had cooled down quite a bit, but you could see a smattering of customers.

Haruno Yukinoshita was sitting in a corner in the back, but there was no one else around her. It was like a void.

Haruno had a deep-red coat slung over her shoulders, a long skirt, and short boots on her feet. A blanket was thrown over her lap—it had to be the café’s—and she was quietly reading a book under a parasol heater. She would occasionally wrap her hands around her hot drink to warm them and take a sip.

At the sight of her, I paused a moment, narrowing my eyes. Something about that picture reminded me of a sight I hadn’t seen for quite some time now.

But I was only entranced for the briefest moment, as then

Haruno noticed us, smiled, and waved. I gave her a little bob of my head, and she beckoned us to sit down opposite her.

"Want a drink?" she asked. "The bread here's great, too."

I wanted to get this over quickly, so I started to say *I'll have what you're having*…and stopped. The glass in Haruno's hand seemed to be filled with mulled wine, and each slosh of the purplish-red liquid wafted with the strong scent of cinnamon.

"Coffee," I said.

"Ah…I'll have a black tea," Yuigahama added.

We quickly finished ordering and waited for our drinks to come. Meanwhile, Haruno stuck a bookmark into the book she'd been reading and tucked it into her bag.

"So? What did you want to talk about?" Haruno leaned forward slightly, dropping her chin onto her hand to examine my face. Her eyes forced me to remember what had happened the other day, whether I wanted to or not. A full smile lay on her glossy lips, and her big eyes were watching me through her smile. Her long legs were folded under the table, and her toe daintily touched my knee.

I tried to get the words out, but they caught in my weirdly dry throat and turned into a sigh.

Frankly, I didn't want to talk with this woman. It wasn't as if I really hated her as an individual, and if I said I just couldn't handle her, then, well, that's how I am with most women. There was no one element I really couldn't stand. Whether it be her appearance or what was on the inside, there were plenty of positives about her.

I was just scared. It was a fear like with the mirror you see in the middle of the night, the slightly cracked-open door you find in a dark room, the sense that something is behind you when you're showering—the kind where you don't even want to make sure what it really is.

My anxiety was telling me that if I said something, absolutely all of it would be caught and trapped, and that I'd have something I didn't want to know shoved in my face again.

But Yuigahama couldn't sit there and watch me floundering. "Um, it's about…the prom."

"Oh, that." The glee on Haruno's face ebbed away like it had never been. She had obviously lost interest, leaning into the backrest. "If you say you want to talk to a pretty older lady, then it's going to be about love, normally," she said jokingly with a dramatic shrug of her shoulders.

I let out a quiet sigh. My coffee had just arrived, and it moistened my throat enough to get out a flippant reply. "You'd normally assume it's to ask advice…"

Haruno smiled back at that. "How very businesslike."

"I hate work, though," I muttered with some irony and a half smile, sensing the tension bleeding away. Yuigahama, sitting beside me, also sounded relieved. It was pathetic, if I do say so myself, but I was frankly glad she'd come with me. If I had been alone, Haruno would have just had me at her whims the whole time. Even if I superficially managed to dodge her moves, in the depths of my heart, I'd be trapped.

I gave Yuigahama a subtle nod to say, *It's okay now*. Of course I didn't suddenly believe I could handle Haruno, but still, I didn't want to appear too lame in front of her.

I brought the coffee to my lips once more and pulled out my phone. "I want you to leak this." I showed her the website for the

dummy prom that had been finished just a while ago.

Haruno studied the screen for a minute but soon let out a little sigh. “Hmm…I don’t get it…”

“Um…they’re against the prom, so if we come up with a new, different one—,” Yuigahama tried to explain, but Haruno smiled kindly at her and cut her off.

“No, I get that.” It seemed that after one look at the website text, Haruno had gotten the gist. It was helpful she was quick on the uptake.

I was relieved about not having to explain the details, but my sigh caught in my throat. Haruno Yukinoshita’s calm, chilly gaze was trained on me.

“What I don’t get is *why* you’re doing this… Didn’t I tell you about the relationship between you three?” Her tone contained a smile and a teasing ring, but also a deep sadness. As if tormenting me for my mistakes, as if lamenting my errors—every single word she laid out seemed to pour ice water on my nerves, gently freezing me. “Do you honestly think this is what’s best for her?”

“…It’s not really got much to do with Yukinoshita. It’s not like she asked me to do it. I’m just doing it on my own. This is for me more than anyone,” I said, the words I’d planned to say.

I’d known if I brought the matter of the leak to Haruno Yukinoshita, I’d be unable to avoid this question. So I said it in the way that was shortest, with the fewest fallacies. It wasn’t an absolutely correct answer, but it couldn’t be a mistake. At the very least, in my mind, it held a kernel of the truth.

Problem was, it really didn’t seem like it would work on Haruno Yukinoshita. That was exactly why I’d been avoiding this meeting with her until the last possible moment.

A smile crossed her face, and she tossed back the hot wine. Stroking the rim of her glass, as if correcting the rights and wrongs of the matter, she said, “Yukino-chan doesn’t want help. You’re doing it without her permission, so it’s not codependency… That’s all just superficial talk, isn’t it? It ultimately doesn’t change anything.”

I couldn’t immediately deny what she’d pointed out, and I didn’t know what to say. Yuigahama glanced anxiously at me, then at Haruno.

Though neither Isshiki nor Hayama—and probably Yuigahama, too—had said it out loud, they all had to be thinking it. I was aware

myself that this was nothing more than wordplay.

"Yukino-chan has chosen independence, and she wants to end that relationship. I think what you can do is stand back and watch, Hikigaya," Haruno said with the kindness of an adult chiding a small child.

I couldn't maintain eye contact with her. She had to be right. Before I knew it, I was clenching the hem of my coat.

"…I don't think that's true," Yuigahama whispered. She was so quiet, her voice was just about drowned out in the wind, but I heard it clearly. I couldn't know her expression from the suppressed emotion in her voice, so I looked at her face.

Her eyes weren't on me or Haruno. She was sitting straight, staring at a point on the table.

Haruno's gaze, which had been focused on me, slid over toward Yuigahama. Then with a minute tilt of her head, she prompted her to continue.

Now the center of attention, Yuigahama continued haltingly. "Maybe it sounds nice to say you'll stand back and watch, but really you're just cutting yourself off. If we avoid it and never do anything, then nothing'll change. All of it will fall apart, and then it'll be over. Us, and the prom…"

The retro lighting of the café cast an ephemeral shadow over her unusually mature expression. That beautiful bearing, and that sorrow on her face, sent pain running through my chest. Or maybe that was because I'd so easily been able to envision the ending she spoke of.

"So we have to be a little closer. We need to be involved. That's the only way we can end this properly. So…" The rambling fragments eventually died out; I don't know what she meant to say after that. With her chin sinking downward, I couldn't read it from her face.

But even so, I understood something now. Really, I'd understood it for a long time. "Yeah… We have to end it properly…," I muttered at no one in particular, maybe just to myself, and Yuigahama quietly nodded at me.

We probably all still shared that same wish. Now that I was sure of it, I was finally able to lift my head.

When our gazes clashed, Haruno smiled kindly, tilting her head subtly as she narrowed her eyes. "You don't care what kind of ending it is? Even if it's one that Yukino-chan doesn't want? That

nobody wants?"

"I'm fine with that." The words flowed out without hesitation.

Haruno's breath caught quietly, as if she was taken by surprise. And then she erased her smile, asking a bit more coolly than before, "…Hey, why go that far, Hikigaya?"

I couldn't answer her question instantly this time. Not because I was uncertain about it; I already had my answer. It was just after being asked similar questions so many times, I was a bit unsure of my choice of words. Beside me, Yuigahama was frozen, patiently listening.

So I decided to reply with my own sort of consistency—avoiding lies as much as possible, but also without contradicting the things I'd said before. "I'm service-minded…I suppose. I want to help. Do you need a reason to help another person?" I shamelessly declared, and the chair beside me rocked, telling me that Yuigahama's shoulders had gone slack.

Haruno breathed a sharp *aha*, looking up at the ceiling. "You're so funny."

"If you're gonna say so, then I wish you'd at least smile."

Whether Haruno realized it herself or not, there was no warmth anywhere on her face. The levity in her voice was false.

When I pointed that out, Haruno grinned as if she'd just remembered to. "You say nothing but lies…and never the truth."

"I mean, I don't really have anything to say, never mind whether it's the truth. And even if I did…" I swallowed the words that just about came out and said something else. "You aren't the one I'd say it to."

"…" For just the slightest instant, Haruno narrowed her eyes as if staring into the sun. But her smile never dropped, and she replied in a joking manner. "…Well, of course." There was a chill to her voice, and the quiet sigh that followed it sounded dry, too. She must have been able to recognize that herself, as she reached for her hot glass and drank down its contents, now long cold. Wiping her lips with her finger, she collected herself. When her face came up again, she was fully smiling. "So that leak—I'll handle it for you."

"Thank you."

Yuigahama and I offered little bows, and Haruno leaned her chin on her hand and started doing something on her phone. "But won't it be difficult, if this is all you have?"

I wasn't expecting her to say that; when she saw my confusion, Haruno broke into an unpleasant smirk. "All the elements are lined up, but normal reasoning won't work on these people. Besides, the one you're dealing with is our mom."

"Ahhh…true…" Imagining the Yukinoshita sisters' mother, Yuigahama and I shared a wry smile.

If those certain parents were to complain about the dummy prom, as planned, then we would be going through their mother again. As the one responsible for this among the students, I would be facing her. Remembering our exchange the other day, I honestly didn't feel like I could win logically, or lyrically.

As I was groaning, wrinkles coming together between my eyes, Haruno yawned with disinterest and added, "But that part would work out depending on how you bring it up, I figure." And then she muttered quietly, "…Since she wouldn't really care about the prom itself."

I didn't really get what she meant by that, and I tilted my head at her, but it seemed Haruno wasn't interested in elaborating, humming as she began scanning the drink menu.

"…Well, I'll just do what I can," I said.

"Mm, do your best." She offered that halfhearted encouragement without even looking at me, and then we were out of things to say.

Considering the hour, it was the perfect moment to leave. When I asked Yuigahama silently, *Should we get going?* she nodded back at me.

"…Then we're gonna head out," I said. "Sorry for taking up your time."

"Ah, thank you very much!" Yuigahama added.

"Uh-huh. See you."

When we stood from our seats, Haruno gave us a little wave. From the way she was drawing the drink menu closer, it seemed she meant to hang around longer.

With one last bow, we left the café.

It wasn't far to the station. On a weekday, it would have been close to the evening rush, but being a Saturday with no special events, there wasn't much traffic or crowds.

When we reached the square in front of the station that also operated as a bus depot, I looked over at Yuigahama, wondering what we'd do next. She'd remained entirely silent since leaving the

café, as if she'd had something on her mind the whole time. She noticed my worry and smiled weakly back at me.

Then her feet suddenly stopped, and she opened her mouth slowly. "…When Haruno said codependency earlier…what did she mean?" She was smiling like she was at a loss, but her tone was terribly serious.

I couldn't even tease her, so instead I went to sit down on a nearby bench and search for the words. Holding her backpack in front of her chest, Yuigahama came to sit down next to me.

"It's hard to explain… You basically get *dependence*, right?" I asked.

Yuigahama buried her face in the backpack in her lap, nodding. Smiling a little back at her, I continued—explaining things as simply as possible, omitting anything specialized and unimportant details.

"Basically, codependency is when the one who's being depended on thinks of it as a good thing, I guess. They find their self-worth in being needed. It gives them a sense of satisfaction and peace of mind…and both of them become unable to escape from that." As I was saying that, I realized my tone of voice was gradually getting lower. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to fit, and the inside of my mouth tasted bitter.

That must have rung a bell with Yuigahama, too, as she bit the edge of her lip. "That's…not a good thing, is it…?"

"Well, I suppose it's not healthy," I muttered.

—So it is a mistake after all.

Yuigahama's expression turned somber, which made me feel bad. I bounded off the bench to shake it off. "…It's not like everything she says is right. I mean you *could* see it that way." *So you don't have to worry about it*, I tried to tell her with a smile, albeit a rather lousy one.

At that, Yuigahama nodded with a slightly sad smile, standing up.

With neither of us particularly taking the lead, we started walking. When we came up to the ticket gates, Yuigahama daintily raised a hand. "Well, then I'm taking the train."

"Yeah. Take care."

"Uh-huh, see you at school… Night, Hikki."

As Yuigahama watched me go with a small wave in front of her chest, I walked off.

After going a ways, I turned back to see she was still in front of the ticket gates, and when our eyes met, she gave me an extra-big wave. I raised my hand lightly in response, but it was so embarrassing that I rushed away from the station.

Now, with the night wind blowing, I hurried down the way home alone.

Now, everything I'd had planned for the day was done. I'd prepared as much as I could.

Now, I just had to bring it to an end.

Interlude…

I don't think I can get drunk tonight, either.

The hot wine warmed up my body, but it didn't get all the way to my core. None of the glasses after that made me feel any better. All I was getting out of this was nausea. Toying with my fifth glass, I was reaching for the wine list and thinking about ordering another bottle, but then I stopped.

This four-seat table was too big. No matter what bottle I ordered, no matter how many glasses I lined up, even if I called someone over—nothing would be able to fill up the empty space.

With nothing else to do, I tried opening the book I'd been reading, but I didn't make even a page of progress, my bookmark stopped on the same spot. I'd reread this one so many times, and even though I knew how the story ended, I've always sought for what lay beyond the printed *The End*, the real conclusion. It was never over.

The single, correct conclusion, with no lies or deception. Even if I couldn't attain it myself, I wouldn't mind if someone else were to prove it really existed.

While my mind was busy, I drained the glass and stared at the opposite seat through its distorted lens. There was nobody there. All I saw was the pretty but unpleasant-seeming woman in the reflection. She was smirking at herself.

Suddenly, another figure appeared in that glass, startling me. The girl who had left before was there. She must have run over, as her shoulders were heaving.

"Did you forget something?" I asked, handing her a blanket and offering her a seat, and she took her old spot.

I leaned my chin on my hand, eyeing her. *So what are you here for?* She squeezed the blanket over her lap and her skirt together, appearing troubled. "Um…I really think what you just said wasn't right… That codependency thing."

Well, that was sudden. *Was this what she'd come back to say?* I started to think, then understood. *I see—so she came today to protect him from me.* If she were motivated by possessiveness, that would be charming, but I got the feeling this was closer to protectiveness.

Honestly, I would have liked to commend her for such admirable behavior, but when someone challenges me directly, I have to fight back. I'm not going to blame genetics, but I've inherited all the worst parts of my mother.

The truth is, I don't like saying these things. It's a hassle, I don't have that much free time, I don't find it interesting, and I'm not exactly eager to invite hatred from kids I'm partial to.

But I'd feel even worse to leave a mistake I might be able to correct.

Knowing it would make me feel bad, I poured the rest of the bottle into the glass.

X X X

A red wave, dark like blood, sprayed up in the glass with rolling, fizzing bubbles. It was like my heart, still pounding after I'd run back from the station.

"That's what it looks like to me," she said. "…The relationship between you three."

I'd never heard of the word *codependency*. I don't even know exactly what it means. I don't understand difficult things—because I pretend not to. Well, sometimes. Sometimes I really don't understand at all.

But this wasn't one of those times, and I realized that fast. This was very straightforward.

"You mean me, too…?" I thought my heart had finally settled, but now it was racing again. I didn't ask for it, and I didn't want it, but it was rushing anyway. I came to the answer quickly.

Then she smiled…and it was very sad. "Hikigaya is dependent on you, you know. You're happy about that, and it makes you want to do anything for him… The truth is, yours is the worst case."

"……You're wrong. That's not—" My lips trembled, and my voice wouldn't come out right. I shook my head a bunch of times. *No, no, no. That can't be how it is.*

"You have to be the most grown-up. You know what those two

are like."

She said something in a gentle tone, but I couldn't hear it anymore.

"That's just…what you do, though. Helping, I mean. If they're struggling, I want to support them, and I always want us to be together, so…it's not that." I think it might have been the first time I've been truly angry, the first time I sincerely glared at someone. The air caught inside me spilled out on its own, and my throat went dry. Wiping my face with my sleeve, I stared straight ahead.

She watched me with a mature expression, but then she suddenly closed her eyes. And then, she muttered in a small, soft voice, "Hey…can you call that something real?" It was like a prayer, a question to some unseen god.

"I…don't know." I'd been thinking this whole time. What is something real? But I really had no idea, so I couldn't help but get quieter as I answered. My vision was blurring from tears, and my face dropped. "…But it's not codependency."

When I lifted my chin, her face looked just like hers, her head tilted, like *Why?* I felt a sharp stab in my heart, and when I clenched a fist over it, the tears came out on their own. I'd thought they were all gone.

I know. This is what I understand. Just this. This is why I can believe in my feelings.

"Because it hurts so much…"

It's not just my chest. Not just my heart. Everything hurts. Everything.

—All of me is crying out that I love them. So much that it hurts.

8

While **wishing** to not go wrong again, at least…

I've never really personally drawn the line for when the end of winter arrives, and when it comes down to it, that's proof that I've only ever vaguely grasped the change in temperature day-to-day. But still, mysteriously, I'm aware of the turning points—most likely because at every juncture, when the occasion arises, something is there.

So this day was probably the end of winter for me.

I'd spent the whole day before cooped up in my room, keeping in contact with Zaimokuza and constantly refreshing social media, meticulously making sure there was nothing wrong with the website. I'd had absolutely no mental rest all weekend.

Monday, after the weekend. The widely loathed Monday. Monday, when what had happened over the weekend would be reported.

When I went to school, the classroom was filled with that end-of-year feeling. The world was getting busy with graduation season, so everyone was chatting about their futures, their plans for spring break, or the end-of-term test. Alone at my seat, outside that kind of conversation, I quietly inclined my ears.

I was waiting for the after-school bell.

Through Haruno Yukinoshita, I had sprinkled the bait. The segment of parents who'd opposed the prom would be unable to overlook the information—the plan they thought they'd put the damper on was getting even wilder. On top of that, since they'd already established a point of contact to act as their intermediary, they would act quicker this time. Something would happen today, or the next.

And my prediction wasn't far off.

The afternoon classes came to an end, and around the time everyone was beginning to relax, Miss Hiratsuka rushed over. She peeked through the door at the front of the classroom, and when

her eyes met mine, she smiled tiredly. “Hikigaya. Do you have a minute? …You’re wanted in the teachers’ office,” she said in a lighthearted manner, bringing a little stir of murmurs from those still nearby. Everything was in my bag already, so I grabbed it and headed right out. Just as I was leaving the classroom, Miss Hiratsuka smiled wryly. “As for the reason…you seem like you know.”

“I can think of several, so I couldn’t say. I’ve been getting called to the teachers’ office over a bunch of little things, after all.”

“Indeed.” Miss Hiratsuka shrugged, a hint of loneliness in her crooked smile, and I feigned a similar expression as I turned away.

And then ahead of my gaze were my classmates, curious about the sight of Miss Hiratsuka and me together. Some of them seemed weirded out, while the usual suspects at the back of the class were reacting in their own ways.

Miura seemed utterly disinterested, spinning her hair around her finger with boredom, and Ebina was watching and nodding like, *That tracks*, while Tobe and the guys were muttering stuff like, “Dude, what did Hikitani do?” laughing and whispering together. *Damn you, Tobe…*

Hayama, however, in the center of the crowd, smiled as cold as a statue as he watched me. There was no way I could know what was in his heart, and I didn’t care to know, but I could detect some compassion there.

Then, when Yuigahama saw Miss Hiratsuka, she seemed to immediately figure out what was going on. She abandoned her things at her desk, just grabbing her nearby coat as she pattered quickly in my direction.

When we came out into the hallway, Yuigahama caught up to us. She probably meant to accompany me. But this was the one thing I couldn’t rely on her for. I’d been leaning on her for everything, up until this very moment. For the finishing touches, I wanted to take the denouncement on my own, at least.

“So is it just me who’s been personally requested?” I asked Miss Hiratsuka.

“That’s right… Well, I don’t know if it’s a personal request. I was told to call the one responsible.”

“Yeah. That’s my professional alias for dubious activity,” I replied carelessly, and Miss Hiratsuka sighed as if I were taking years off her life.

“That’s a great name for the number one most in-demand boy in the establishment.”

Yuigahama watched the exchange glumly, then hedged, “…I think I should go, too, though.”

“It’s okay—I’ll handle it,” I replied, and Yuigahama opened her mouth like she was going to say something. But right before she did, her breath caught quietly, and she swallowed her words, pulled her lips tight, and gave a little nod.

That strange gesture and pause bothered me, but when I gave her a questioning look, Miss Hiratsuka smacked my shoulder. “You don’t have to worry. I’ll be with you. Nothing funny will happen,” she reassured me. Yuigahama nodded, returning a faint smile.

“Then I’ll head over for a bit,” I said.

“Yeah… Let me know if there’s any news,” Yuigahama replied.

I raised a hand in lieu of a reply, and I walked off with Miss Hiratsuka.

Following a step behind my teacher, I watched her stride along in her white coat with her hands thrust in her pockets, as if I wanted to burn the sight into my eyes.

“Is this just like you planned it?” In the window-lined hallway, she moved her head slightly to ask my reflection in the glass.

“…More or less,” I answered. Frankly, it wasn’t like absolutely everything was going according to plan, but I’d managed to accomplish the bare minimum. For me, that was a fine success.

I could tell even with her back facing me that Miss Hiratsuka was smiling wryly. “Well, I can’t say I’m surprised. Do you think you have a chance?”

“I don’t need a chance. This is the only way.”

The continuous window glass was replaced by wall, and I couldn’t see Miss Hiratsuka’s expression. I could only hear a sound like a lamenting sigh. “…That’s not a bad answer. I like that sort of thing,” she said, and then she suddenly vanished. Even though I knew she’d just turned a corner to go down the stairs, I found myself hurrying and made a face at myself.

Eventually, like some kind of song, would I wind up searching for the sight of her over every little thing? Imagining it made my steps get heavier. As I slowly descended one step after another, the distance between Miss Hiratsuka and me widened. That was how my parting with her would go, too, in all likelihood.

Both of us remained silent. The only sound was our footsteps.

When we approached the landing, Miss Hiratsuka turned around halfway, white coat fluttering. “Do you have time soon, Hikigaya? It doesn’t have to be today—tomorrow or after that.”

I considered my plans a bit. My time today and tomorrow would probably be taken up by dealing with the aftermath, but I didn’t really have anything to do after that.

We probably wouldn’t be having any club activities, either. No matter how the prom turned out.

Those thoughts delayed my answer. Our footsteps filled the silence in the interim.

“…Well, I’m generally free,” I replied.

“I see. Then…,” Miss Hiratsuka said as she also slowly pondered things like me, pausing a moment. “…Then let’s go for ramen!” She turned to look at me, her long hair swaying as she cracked a powerful grin.

With a half smile of my own, I nodded back at her.

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Eventually, we arrived at the reception room, and Miss Hiratsuka knocked. The answering voice was clear and familiar. It seemed the visitor was Yukinoshita’s mother after all.

When I entered the room after Miss Hiratsuka, the lady standing by the window turned around gracefully. In her lavender kimono modestly decorated with peach blossoms, she embodied the “beauty looking back” of classic art.

There was already coffee placed at the seat of honor. Mrs. Yukinoshita took a seat there and then, in a gentle voice, suggested I go ahead and take the spot opposite her. When I did so, Miss Hiratsuka sat down next to me.

“We met the other day as well, didn’t we?” Mrs. Yukinoshita smiled merrily.

I responded with an attempt at a smile, too. “Yes…it was good to meet you then.”

Her formal smile reminded me of Haruno, and frankly, I didn’t really like it. She must have taken my reaction as anxiety, as she brought a hand to her mouth, studying me like you would a small animal you found adorable.

“Well then, to begin again…may I ask about your business here

today?" Miss Hiratsuka got the conversation started, and Mrs. Yukinoshita's meek smile faded as she drew out her phone.

"Oh, yes. So then, if you'll pardon my getting straight to it…is this something you thought up?" She set the phone on the low table, and displayed on the screen was the dummy prom website.

Assuming this was the do-or-die moment, I put on a flippant grin. You need a bold attitude for brinkmanship diplomacy. The only way to do it is to put them in crisis mode, make them believe an explosion is imminent to draw concessions out of them. "It's an opinion of some students, I suppose. There's a bracket saying they'd rather have a big, modern one, like people our age do," I said, using a line I'd heard at some point with some irony, and Miss Hiratsuka's elbow jabbed into my side.

Mrs. Yukinoshita watched me pleasantly. "I see…" She put a hand to her temple, narrowing her big eyes. I'd seen that gesture before, as well as that look like a great cat on the hunt.

I had a bad feeling about this, and sweat beaded on my scalp. I don't mean to brag, but I've never been wrong when it comes to these sorts of premonitions.

Suddenly, Mrs. Yukinoshita's lips split wide. "Setting up a fake isn't a poor idea, but the flaws are somewhat apparent. And I do believe that even with additional options, you're going to have trouble if the fundamental issue isn't resolved. What are you thinking about that?"

Her gaze and her tone were icy now, and something cold shivered up my spine. The end had sounded like a question to me, but my head wasn't working well enough to reach an answer.

Mrs. Yukinoshita had determined that my dummy prom plan was a fake. Had she heard something from Haruno beforehand? No, Haruno hadn't given me any reason to believe she got along with her mother, so she wouldn't go out of her way to tell her.

So she must have simply seen through my plans. And on top of that, her opening move was to point that out, to kill my start. She had made it clear that she was way beyond me.

I had no clue how to follow that, staring stunned at this woman.

She, however, was perfectly unruffled, touching her closed fan to her lips with a gleeful smile. She appeared excited to see my next move.

If she was going to act that way, then all I could do was smile

awkwardly. My ideas about how I'd bring things up all flew out of my head. Since her first move had been to call this plan a fake, no matter how many words I used now, there was no point. Hayama and Haruno had both seen through the dummy prom at a glance. I'd already lost the moment I'd assumed it would work on Yukinoshita's mother.

Realizing I was unable to reply, Miss Hiratsuka cut in without missing a beat. "We did anticipate the practical issue that some students may not comply with the request for self-restraint. There remains a risk that they could hold such an event regardless, outside our purview. So it may be wise to choose to ensure it's under our management, to some degree. The student council has adjusted the plan so that it can satisfy everyone involved." Miss Hiratsuka offered the documents she'd set out on the side table to Mrs. Yukinoshita, and to me as well. Flipping through them, I saw that the revised content Yukinoshita and Isshiki had been discussing the other day was reflected there. Mrs. Yukinoshita surveyed the documents as well, but she didn't react much. Her expression was somewhat dour.

While Miss Hiratsuka had given me the support I'd expected, the dummy prom was originally supposed to have been there as a manifestation of that risk. Now that it had been completely exposed as a fake, what Miss Hiratsuka said was far from convincing. I was really sensing that our attempts to sway the other party were a step behind.

Mrs. Yukinoshita just tilted her head in an *Oh dear* sort of gesture. "Yes…while I do believe you've lined up the elements to convince them, I couldn't say if this would gain their understanding… Some of them are so stubborn, you see," she said with a forced smile. I'd heard that somewhere before, though worded differently. "Even if I were to bring it up now, I'm not sure it would be enough to change their opinions."

Ignoring the ongoing discussion, I quietly closed my eyes and searched my memories. Haruno Yukinoshita had been the one to say that. And she'd told me her mother didn't care about the prom itself.

So then why had Mrs. Yukinoshita been sent here to discuss this?

It was simple. Because it had become a problem.

Yukinoshita's mother was here as one tool, a means to resolve

that. The purpose of her presence was nothing other than resolving an issue, striking off a dispute, and her own thoughts and principles had nothing to do with her actions. It was her nature to avoid being seen as a problem or causing a fuss, and she was acting in accordance with that.

That was exactly why I'd devised the dummy prom, with the intention of leading her to the more appropriate event. My idea wasn't wrong.

But I'd drawn the line in the wrong place. A method is a method and a tool is a tool, and there is no concept of enemy or allies in those.

Mrs. Yukinoshita was nothing more than the messenger in this, the negotiator operating under the will of another party. My opponent in this game was not her. She was ultimately a piece on the board—the strongest one, the queen.

So then I still had one move left to make.

Just about the worst and most despicable move—I'm the only one in the world who could use it, and I wouldn't be forgiven for using it even once.

But if that was my only card, then I had no choice but to play it.

"…Couldn't I gain your cooperation in order to convince them?" I asked.

Mrs. Yukinoshita cocked her head, surprised I would say something. The innocent gesture belied her age, making me smile. The way she reacted when she heard something unexpected truly resembled *her*.

"We have everything we need to win them over, don't we?" I continued. "So then couldn't the results change, depending on who says them?"

What matters is not what's said, but who says them is an expression that's been used to death, but it's the truth. If it was Yukinoshita's mother instead of me, she would be sure to argue down those stubborn parents. They'd sought her support in the first place because they understood she was of higher status.

When you get right down to it, this game was really just about who stole the queen.

"…The fact is that I have no connections. I wouldn't be very convincing." With a dry smile and a pathetic reply, I put an unknown black king into check.

“That’s not true at all. I think you’ve put in a fair effort, in such a short amount of time. Enough that it made me curious who had done it,” Mrs. Yukinoshita said, smiling as if she was sincerely impressed before tilting her head questioningly. “…I’m sorry, that reminds me, could I ask your name?” she said, lowering her eyebrows apologetically.

Miss Hiratsuka instantly grabbed my sleeve to tell me no. She would understand quite well what it would mean for me to give my name here.

But my purpose as a stratagem in the game had ended the moment she had said those words. Now, there was only to fulfill my role as a pawn.

This piece normally had no use at all—you could even call it a deadbeat good-for-nothing that didn’t belong anywhere.

But under the right conditions, it could even take down a queen.

“I’m Hachiman Hikigaya.” When I said my name, Miss Hiratsuka released my cuff with a little resigned sigh.

“Hikigaya…,” Mrs. Yukinoshita repeated in a quiet, hesitant voice as she put a hand to her mouth, letting her gaze wander downward. Eventually, it must have come to her, as she suddenly raised her head with a sharp inhalation. “Oh… You’re…”

I returned her gaze with a formal smile. I’m sure I wasn’t pulling it off as well as Hayama or Haruno, but I put in as much effort as I could. Maybe it paid off, as I saw out of the corner of my eye that Miss Hiratsuka was stunned.

The problem was what came next. Now that I’d introduced myself, there could be no defects in my statements or attitude. If I seemed overbearing or arrogant—or self-abasing—she would take it as a threat. And once she did, the next time would become my fault and give her an opening to take advantage of me. So I had to show her by acting with honesty and sincerity that I had no such intention.

“I must have caused you a lot of trouble before. I left everything to my parents, so I wasn’t able to pay my respects to you. I’m very sorry.” The words were as flat as possible. My bow was at an angle not too deep, not too shallow. I focused entirely on acting only as a pawn that would fulfill the function required of me. I inserted no unnecessary feelings there.

It was a type of protocol, the etiquette of diplomacy. A hint of

excessive theatricality was just perfect.

The message in that pose must have reached her accurately, as she responded in kind. “Oh, no, I should be the one apologizing for my daughter causing such trouble. How was that injury to your leg? It must have caused you quite a lot of inconveniences—I must sincerely apologize.” She bowed her head deeply, and I replied with an appropriate level of spirit.

“Thankfully, it’s fully healed; it’s even stronger than before. You’ll be able to see me dance at the prom.” I moved that leg on the spot, tap-tap-tapping my shoe in a nonsense step. Mrs. Yukinoshita put a hand to her mouth in a silent *Oh my* and laughed pleasantly.

“Manners!” Miss Hiratsuka smacked my thigh, enabling me to finally end my clowning. Filled with self-loathing at my own buffoonery, I desperately choked back the sigh that threatened to escape me.

A smile remained on Mrs. Yukinoshita’s lips as she narrowed her eyes. “…What nerve, indeed,” she murmured softly. There was a coldness to her gaze that seemed to be evaluating me, and it felt like it was slowly freezing me over. Her eyes seemed to see through anything—enough to make me feel a little sick.

But then her gaze suddenly eased. Mrs. Yukinoshita spread her fan to hide her mouth, then giggled and smiled behind it. She seemed so innocent, it just about deluded me into thinking this was her true nature. “Not bad.”

“I’m obliged.” I pretended to sweep my bangs back so that I could keep calm, wiping the sweat off my forehead. My dress shirt was sticking to my skin. My throat was so dry, just breathing hurt.

To anyone watching, I’d just introduced myself and talked about events of the past. There was no inherent meaning in my name, or in that conversation.

So whoever heard it just had to read their own meaning into it.

Yukinoshita’s mother continued giggling for a bit, but once she’d snapped her fan shut, it quieted down. “Yes…I will give a try to discussing this with the parents and guardians. If I could have you in attendance as well, Miss Hiratsuka, that would also help quite a bit.”

“If you could offer me some possible dates, I’ll fit it into my schedule.”

As the adults’ conversation continued in a businesslike manner, I zoned out. The thread of my tension snapped, and the exhaustion

hit me like a wave. I found myself staring up at the ceiling, sighing deeply as I spaced out.

"Hikigaya. Can I get you to handle something?"

When a voice suddenly addressed me, I panicked and sat up straight. "Oh, right."

It seemed that the conversation had made quite a lot of progress while I'd been ignoring it. Miss Hiratsuka tapped the stack of documents against the table, getting ready to withdraw. On the opposite side of the table, Mrs. Yukinoshita was also preparing to leave.

"I have to go out after this," said Miss Hiratsuka. "Will you tell Yukinoshita that we're moving forward with the prom, based on the revised plan? I'll leave it to you how to tell her."

"Uh-huh… Um, I understand…," I said, still not grasping how things had gotten to this stage, while Miss Hiratsuka nodded. Her eyes were telling me to hurry off. Well, she was right. We didn't have any time to spare before the prom. If it had been settled, then the message should be sent right away.

"All right, then." When I stood up, Mrs. Yukinoshita smiled.

"Let's meet again, Hikigaya."

"Ha-ha-ha… Then pardon me." Avoiding answering yes or no with a dry smile, I bowed and left the reception room.

I never want to see her again, if I can manage it…

X X X

Quietly walking through the school building as twilight approached, I eventually reached the student council room.

Standing in front of the door, I knocked. In the brief time until a response came, I breathed a deep sigh.

Eventually, after no footsteps at all, the door opened with a quiet creak. The heat had to be on pretty high; I felt the hot air from the slight crack. A girl with glasses and braids held the knob. I seemed to recall she was their clerk. She seemed to know who I was and let me in, though she was a bit timid about it. "Come in…"

I gave her a casual bow of thanks and went inside to see the vice president at a desk right ahead crying, "There's no time…no time…" as he worked.

Good, good. Excellent. Suffer more.

I scanned the whole room, but Yukinoshita was nowhere to be seen. There was just Isshiki at the desk at the back, crunching on snacks as she stared at me vacantly, tilting her head. "…I didn't call you here."

I'm not allowed to come if I'm not called? That's no good.

I was opening my mouth to start by telling her the purpose of my visit when Isshiki clapped her hands. "Oh, is it to help? You're applying for slavery? Unpaid labor?"

What's with that logic? Just how far are you gonna jump with this conversation? I was a little exhausted by the familiar antics of old Irohasu, and my shoulders slumped. "Look forward to next year. I'll introduce a promising rookie to you." I responded to her usual nonsense with the first thing that came to mind, and then I asked, "Anyway, where's Yukinoshita?"

Isshiki tilted her head like *Huh?* before glancing over to the simple desk Yukinoshita must have been using. "Huhhh, now that you mention it, she's not here. Hmmgh." Isshiki had only just noticed, so Yukinoshita hadn't been gone long.

Okay, so did she run off because the heat was on too high again? Whatever the case, if Yukinoshita wasn't around, then there was no point in my being there. "All right, then never mind. See you."

"Ah, hey! What?! Didn't you come for a reason?!" Isshiki called me to a stop when I tried to stride on out again.

Hearing the word *reason*, I suddenly realized. Miss Hiratsuka hadn't specifically told me to, but it would probably be best to tell Isshiki. I stopped and turned back to her. "Oh yeah. The prom's officially on, with your plan. You can make it happen. Good luck."

"Uh-huh… Huh?" Isshiki's jaw dropped, and she tilted her whole upper body along with her head. It would be too much trouble to explain what had happened if she pressed me for details, so I would slip out before she had time to collect her thoughts.

X X X

I hadn't even decided where I would go, but my feet never hesitated, taking me there automatically. I was sure she had to be there.

The empty halls of the special-use building. Nearly a year had passed since I'd begun walking through here to go to the clubroom.

I could probably even get there with my eyes closed.

Eventually, I saw the door ahead of me. I came to stand in front of it, and I ran my hand over the handle before gripping it. Though it had to be made with the same material as any classroom door, I felt like I would never forget this cool temperature or hardness.

With a bit of a pull, it rattled in its track and moved smoothly.

Before my eyes was a completely ordinary classroom, nothing unusual about it.

But this room had a very different quality to it because of the presence of one girl.

In the slanting sun, with a breeze blowing, Yukino Yukinoshita stood by the window, looking outside. She must have been airing out the room that nobody had used in a while, as the window was wide-open and the curtains were fluttering. The sight was so picturesque, I wondered if even after the world ended, she would still be here, just like this.

My body and spirit came to a stop.

—I was entranced.

Noticing the presence of a visitor, Yukinoshita held her hair in place against the wind as she turned around. Her eyes widened a moment in surprise, but her expression quickly turned to a smile. “Hello.”

“…Uh-huh,” I answered, and she closed the window. When the fluttering curtains wafted down, the sound disappeared from the room. All that filled this tranquil space was the vivid red of the twilight.

Squinting against its brightness, Yukinoshita turned away from the window, sweeping her glossy black hair back over her shoulders. “Did you have some business here?”

“Oh, just a message for you.”

“Oh, I’m sorry you had to come all the way up here. I took up your time.”

“You don’t have to worry about it. It didn’t take long,” I replied as I pulled out the chair closest to the entrance. Sitting down in my usual spot, I casually gestured for Yukinoshita to sit as well. She seemed momentarily confused, but when I waited, she eventually sighed in resignation and went to sit in the chair closest to the window.

“About the prom—ultimately, your revised plan went through,” I told her. “She’s going to explain to the parents who opposed it to

win them over."

Though this would be Yukinoshita's first time hearing this, she didn't appear surprised, not so much as twitching an eyebrow as she quietly listened. Despite my misgivings about that, I added at the end, "So, well…this is my loss."

"No." Eventually, Yukinoshita sighed deeply and muttered, "It's your win."

"…Why?"

"Well, the whole affair wound up like this because I took advantage of your tactics. Functionally speaking, this is your victory."

There was something that bothered me about the way she was smiling in that self-deprecating way, and I decided not to keep my doubts inside. "…But you still anticipated this. Didn't you have a vague idea of what I'd do, at least? Meaning you won after all."

When Hayato Hayama and Haruno Yukinoshita found out about the dummy prom, they'd both instantly seen through it. Yukinoshita's mother had just about gotten me in checkmate. So then it was no surprise for Yukino Yukinoshita, who was on a similar level, to see through Hachiman Hikigaya's shallow wit.

In fact, the way Yukinoshita and Isshiki had been putting forth ideas had already been sort of like presenting a false premise. Their strategy, presenting two options and shooting each other down in an attempt to derive the correct answer, had actually helped clue me in to the idea. The groundwork had already existed there for her to come to the same conclusion I did.

Yukinoshita lowered her eyes and shook her head at my question. "That's not a certainty. As long as we assumed that the prom itself was being opposed, then that logic wouldn't be valid… But I had a feeling you would still find a way."

Since she wasn't denying the fact that she'd seen through my idea, I was forced to admit she was impressive as always. But there was a shadow in her smile at the end. I wanted to deny that, so I gave her a smirk and a little joke. "That's a lot of trust… Pretty surprising," I teased.

"I was surprised, too. I have no idea why the thought came so easily." Yukinoshita smiled wryly in return, if a little bashfully. It was a glimpse of regular teen girlishness, and my breath caught a bit. As I groped for a reply, she murmured in a fragile voice, "I was…dependent enough on you to think that."

A plaintive regret was clear in her eyes as she gazed at me. I couldn't stand it, and I looked away. "…Even if that were true, that doesn't change the fact of your victory. Your winning condition was to actualize the prom with both our methods, right? So then what happened was your plan, your idea."

"…You're all right with my being…the winner?" she asked weakly.

I wanted to end this conversation, so I turned away, nodding.

"Well then…our competition is over now. So will you do what I say?" She struck back, and I couldn't ignore those words. When my gaze snapped over to her, she clenched her fists tight, abandoning her earlier fragility and pressing her lips together. Her eyes, waiting for my answer, wavered with urgent determination.

"…No, that's not happening," I said. "It's true that this one is your win. But it's not like that means you're the *overall* winner. What's the total score?"

"If we're talking about the conditions for victory, I do recall you said…if I win this competition, then I win, and you would do what I say."

Seeing her explain that so dispassionately, I was aware my lips were dry. A memory passed through deep in my mind, telling me I'd heard that line before. Even while I was internally panicking, I wasn't going to give up. "…That's just about the wording. I mean, a different perspective."

Yukinoshita let out a shaky sigh, and then in an intimate tone, sweetly entreating, she murmured, "Then…you decide."

Before that fragile, transparent smile, I realized my own loss. She fully understood how I would answer if she said that to me.

Since I had made up my mind to respect Yukino Yukinoshita's decision and guarantee her independence, I wouldn't be okay with her ceding the decision to anyone else—even myself.

This was why she'd accepted this competition. For the sake of this one moment and this one answer, she'd deliberately abandoned and ignored all misunderstandings, conflicts, and disagreements.

She was going to bring this competition, this relationship, to an end.

"I can't decide that…," I said. "This isn't just for us to decide. Yuigahama is a part of the competition, too. Besides, Miss Hiratsuka is a biased judge. And besides, there's like, I mean…"

But I couldn't accept that way of concluding it. I flung out every

idea I could. I couldn't let it end like this. *Wait, wait*, I was thinking, reaching my arm out into empty air. I didn't know how to stop her, forgetting even to inhale.

But when I trailed off, Yukinoshita smiled sadly. Her eyes were watery. "…I'll be honest. It's been fun. It was the first time that spending time with someone else could seem comfortable and fun to me…"

Her tears were so close to the surface that if she told me she was honestly happy, then I couldn't deny it or tell her to stop. When I weakly lowered my arm, Yukinoshita nodded gratefully, then said what she wanted to say

"I've never…quarreled or fought like that…or cried in front of others that way before. And when we went out together, I was so nervous. I'd never done this before; it was nothing but unknowns… I never knew it was all right to rely on someone. So somewhere along the line, I went wrong…" Her voice was trembling as she said it all, unprompted.

I looked up at the ceiling. The sunset in the distance stung my eyes, but I couldn't close them. I just exhaled humid air.

"This relationship is false. It's wrong. I'm sure it's not what you wished for." When she tied her monologue together like that, I knew *The End* had already been typed out for us, and I finally focused on her face. "I'll be okay. It's…all right now. You saved me."

Wiping away a shining droplet with her finger, Yukino Yukinoshita smiled beautifully. "So now…let's put an end to this competition…and this relationship."

If that was her answer, then there was no reason for me to say no.

My goal of saving her had been accomplished, and with this relationship brought to a close, the codependency was resolved, and I'd kept my pride as a man. That service-mindedness or whatever, I'd never had it to begin with. The club, and my work, was over.

So now there was nothing. All my reasons to be involved with her were gone.

"Okay… Then I lose." I sighed out everything, and then, so as to fulfill the last responsibility remaining to me, I asked her, "I'll do what you say. What should I do? …I'll make anything happen that I can."

The truth was, I'd sworn that no matter what happened, that

was the one thing I would grant.

Yukinoshita let out a sigh that sounded relieved, then told me the words I'm sure she had been affectionately, carefully keeping warm inside her. "Grant Yuigahama's request."

"Can I take that as your request?"

"Yes." She closed her eyes, nodding as if she were watching someone go to their demise.

With the gentlest smile I could, I answered, "…Okay."

Ending our final exchange, I stood from my chair. Yukinoshita didn't move from her place. My footsteps were opening up the distance between us until eventually I reached the hallway.

And then, quietly and gently, as if catching it in my arms, I closed the door.

Interlude…

I locked the door firmly so it would never open again.

Just one final time.

I stroked the door, memorizing the sensation with my skin.

The colder it was, the more it hurt. The more I could believe that the answer I'd chosen was something real.

There was no other way for me to make sure, so I would never know the right answer. I would never be done with searching for mistakes.

I yearned so burningly for just one single thing that was real, it became tangled up enough to chafe. I couldn't even cry as I just burned myself out—until what remained was a hopelessly twisted fake.

But to me, it was a fake like no other. One that could never be replaced.

I didn't want it to break, at least. So I would quietly and carefully tuck it away, and that would bring an end to everything.

—Please let this be the right ending.

With that prayer, I released the door.

I took one step away, then two—until I was too far away to touch it, even if I reached out.

Translation Notes

Chapter 1 … **Shizuka Hiratsuka** feels keenly nostalgic about the past.

1 "…the word *calm* has an abnormally Shizuka Hiratsuka vibe to it." *Heisei*, meaning "calm," includes the kanji for "flat" (*hira*) and "quiet" (*shizuka*), which appear in her name.

2 "…very likely the school would 'make inferences' and act based on what they believed she wanted." The term used here, *sontaku*, is very specific to Japanese business culture, and it means to make inferences about what important people want and then acting without specific approval in order to appease them. It was a buzzword especially around 2017, when Prime Minister Shinzo Abe got into a number of scandals involving discounted deals or special contracts granted to him based on things he had never said, as people tried to get on his good side. This business culture has been criticized as a way for people in power to avoid responsibility.

3 "It's like turtling with Guile." In *Street Fighter II*, crouching with Guile is known as the *machi-gairu* (waiting Guile) stance in Japanese and was a popular tactic.

4 "…then you start reading ahead into each other's moves like you're Yoshiharu Habu at a shogi tournament, and before you know it, you're getting sorted into the social equivalent of Habus and Habu-nots." Yoshiharu Habu is a professional shogi player. The original pun here was on Habu's name and the

word “social exclusion” (*habu*).

5 “In these games of reading one another, if you lack the Guile to roast the competition, then forget T. Hawk or Eagle or even Birdie—you’re just a cooked goose.” The original Japanese line here is a succession of puns: “In these games of reading one another, if you can’t win [deep-fry], you’re not *zangi* [fried chicken / Zangief] or *kara-age* [fried chicken] or anything —you’re just yakitori [fried chicken, failing to win a single hand in a half game of mah-jongg].”

6 Treasured Tool is a term for special weapons in the Fate universe.

7 “Maybe soon enough, they’ll be saying the term *political correctness* is discriminating against people who failed their civics class, and that word will be politically incorrect, too, I dunno.” In the original, this was “…they’ll be saying the term *word-hunting* is discriminating against hunter-gatherer people, and that word will get hunted [too]…” *Kotoba-gari* (word hunting) is similar to what we might call the “euphemistic treadmill” in English, with the most taboo words tending to be associated most often with disability and class.

8 “Strength is power.” In Japanese, this line is *Chikara wa power*, literally “Power is power,” a nonsensically redundant quote from Black Zeus in *Shin Bikkuriman*.

9 “…lifting is the most powerful solution. You get what I mean? Because I sure don’t.” *Lifting Is the Most Powerful Solution* is a comic life-advice book by the author Testosterone that was popular in 2016. Meanwhile, “You get what I mean? Ahhh, you won’t get it” was the catchphrase of Chitose Shokakuya, a singer / TV host who was big in the 1970s. Here, Hachiman is taking advantage of the vague subject to make it about himself.

10 “Mach stress” is another Buronto-ism, the famous *FFXI* player

of “With this, I can win” or “Rarely often happens” fame. Many of his remarks have become Internet memes.

11 ***“If I don’t, then Doraemon can’t go back to the future…”*** This is a famous line from an episode of *Doraemon* where Nobita is in a fight with Gian, and he says, “I have to win on my own, or Doraemon can’t go back to the future!” (Doraemon is a robotic cat from the future sent to help Nobita.)

Chapter 2 … There’s something **Iroha Isshiki** wants to make sure of, no matter what.

1 ***“What the heck—is she a gate guard at Edina or what?”*** Edina is a town in *Dragon Quest III* where the guards won’t let anyone through who isn’t noble enough.

2 **“Oh-hooo, verily sooo?”** *Ee, hontou ni gozaru kaa?* is a quote from Sasaki Kojirou / Assassin in the Fate franchise.

3 ***“But what does it all meeeeean?”*** In Japanese, this line ends with *dattebayo*, the iconic verbal tic from *Naruto*. Originally, it was just Naruto saying, “What do you mean?” but the line turned into a meme on the *Naruto* threads on Futaba Channel. There were a number of nonsensical memes only understood by insiders (“It’s Izanami”; “It’s become a sacrifice”), prompting people who weren’t in on the joke to respond with this line, which then became a meme in its own right.

4 **“…Seventeen CosmoGirls with Vogue thoughts in their heads…”** Originally, these magazines were *Akamoji* (meaning “red letter”), *Popteen*, and *Pichi Lemon*.

Chapter 3 … **Yui Yuigahama** continues to stand back and watch, to the end.

1 **“Fashion-wise, I was in the old Takanohana-*oyakata* style.”** Kouji Takanohana is a former sumo wrestler known for always wearing scarves just hanging around his neck without wrapping

them, and he has a lot of scarves. (*Oyakata* is a rank for someone who manages other sumo wrestlers.)

2 **"*Even if I say,* Vaaaanilla! Vanilla! Great pay! *she's not gonna come follow me, huh?*"** Vanilla is the name of a recruiting service that seeks girls for sex work businesses.

3 **"Aha! So you're actually a good person, eh?"** This is the same reference as "Aha! Then she's a hot stud, eh?" from Volume 12. It's based on the Internet meme *Hahan! Sate ha hizokusei da na* (Aha! Then fire element, huh?) over a picture of a swimmer with a silly expression on her face. The meme is used whenever coming up with guesses that are very apparently wrong.

4 **"*So she's actually a genius, eh?*"** This is the same reference as above.

5 **"*Times like these, you have to take a helping hand from anyone, even a cat!*"** A common Japanese idiom is "borrowing a cat's paw," meaning "being so busy you would even accept help from a cat."

6 **"*…and we'll get a new* Armored Core *game!*"** *Armored Core* is the series FromSoftware did before *Demon's Souls*, but since *Dark Souls* became such a hit, fans are generally resigned to the knowledge that they're basically never going back to *Armored Core*.

7 **"*Who are you saying hello to? Pathos? Or courage? In that case, first you have to say farewell, no tears…*"** This is a reference to the lyrics from the opening song to the *tokusatsu* show *Space Sheriff Gavan*.

8 **"*So down-to-earth! Like the meteorite that killed the dinosaurs!*"** The original line here is "Dry! Komachi is Super Dry!" (like the beer). In Japanese, *dorai* means "unemotional" or "down-to-earth."

9 **"Praise the Earth"** ("Daichi Sanshou") is a very standard choral

number in Japan, and you can find many recordings of it on YouTube. “Song for Leaving the Nest” (“Sudachi no Uta”) is a standard graduation song.

10 **“And, like, that’s the acclamation, and that was elementary school.”** The acclamation, or *yobikake*, is a part of elementary school graduation ceremonies where they line all the children up to give recitations about their time at school and thanks toward the teachers.

Chapter 4 … Once again, **Hachiman Hikigaya** makes a speech.

1 **“Slowly, slowly, like a *kyogen* performer…slowly, slowly, slowly…”** *Kyogen* is a type of traditional Japanese comic theater. This line is a reference to a bit where a comedian from the *manzai* duo Chocolate Planet did an imitation of the *kyogen* performer Motoya Izumi.

2 **“…maybe I’ll be able to fire off a midair Motoya chop…”** This was a move Motoya Izumi unveiled in 2005, when he entered pro wrestling. It involves jumping from the corner to leap onto his opponent and repeatedly karate chop his head.

3 **“This is a Soubu High School workplace reform, the Professional High System…”** The “Highly Skilled Professional System” is a workplace reform that was discussed in the news for years before finally being enacted in 2019. The intent is actually the opposite of what Hachiman describes; it basically cuts off overtime pay for skilled white-collar workers in an attempt to reduce superfluous overtime. It’s called “Kou-Pro” for short using the *kou* from “highly skilled,” which Hachiman puns on the *high* in “high school.”

4 **“Wait and hope”** is a quote from *The Count of Monte Cristo*, but Zaimokuza surely heard it in *Gankutsuou*, the anime loosely based off the original novel.

Chapter 5 … At some point unknown, the **ending credits** begin to roll.

1 **"…into the grand blue. The courtyard just about turned into an ocean of red…"** *Grand Blue*, localized as *Grand Blue Dreaming*, is a manga about a diving club.

2 **"*Oh yeah, the Pastimer's Club, right? My memories about it are vague, but I do recall it being a workshop of fun, the time we played Millionaire there.*"** The Pastimer's Club is the name of the club in *Asobi Asobase*, which is subtitled as "Workshop of Fun" in English.

3 **"He is a fool, a buffoon, a clowning knave!"** In Japanese, this third term is *hyouge mono*, an archaic term meaning "jocular fellow" and a reference to the historical manga *Hyouge Mono* by Yoshihiro Yamada.

4 **"…unease stirred among all three of the glasses. *Zawa… zawa…* I don't know why even Zaimokuza was joining in on their *zawa zawa*-ing."** *Zawa zawa* is a normal sound effect for murmuring or unease, but the manga *Gambling Apocalypse Kaiji* takes it to memetic levels, with constant *zawa…zawa…* in basically every tense scene (read: every single scene).

5 **"…a bill that features a portrait of Ichiyou Higuchi, it makes paying the bill easy (we call this a grown-up with *Growing Up*)."** Ichiyou Higuchi is one of the most prominent modern women writers in Japan, and she features on the five thousand yen note. One of her most famous books is called *Takekurabe*, sometimes titled in English as *Growing Up*. In Japanese, instead of the "showing up/shown up" bit, the wordplay here was *oreshirabe* (personally researched), *chichishirabe* (researched by my dad), and then *Takekurabe*.

6 **"I am very thankful. Thankful for everything that has made our meeting possible!"** This is a quote from Netero in *Hunter X Hunter* when facing a particularly formidable enemy.

7 "We were on the road to having a toast: *Thinking of our firm bonds, happiness to you.*" This is from the lyrics to the 1988 single "Kanpai" (Cheers) by Tsuyoshi Nagabuchi.

8 "My *youkai* radar cowlick was pinging, but I was too scared to face the source." The hair of the protagonist of *GeGeGe no Kitaro* is known to stick up in the presence of *youkai*.

9 "…I encouraged myself: *I'll do my best to wrap this up*!" *Ganbaru zoi*, with the cutesy meaningless sentence-ending *zoi*, is from the protagonist of the manga *New Game!*

Chapter 6 … Privately, **Hayato Hayama** feels regret.

1 "…all the parts of a human, body and mind. My cells are at work, so I don't have to be, right…?" "All the parts of a human, body and mind" is a reference to an old ad for the Olympus Corporation, which manufactures optics, like for cameras and medical equipment. "My cells are at work" is a reference to *Cells at Work*, an educational biology manga.

2 "Zombie Land Chiba" is just a Hachimanification of the anime *Zombie Land Saga*.

3 "Tamanawa isn't a crude fish. Don't classify him with suckers and blowfish." The original pun here was on *bora* (volunteer) and *bora* (striped mullet, a kind of fish), the joke being on fish that you generally throw back when caught. Hachiman says, "He's actually super-gourmet material."

4 Supreme Being Overlord is a reference to the light-novel series *Overlord*.

5 "…*Soubu High School Neo-Prom-ject.*" The Japanese title was Soubu High School Prom Saiko Project, with *Saiko* being a pun on "reconsider" and "greatest."

6 "Alternating between hot and cold gets me sorted out…" Hachiman brings up a lot of very specific sauna lingo here that

even many Japanese people might not understand. *Totonou* (sorted out) describes the feeling you get after a sauna, which varies for different people, and some people even describe feeling high or euphoric. *Rouryu* is hot water with scented oils that's thrown on the coals in a sauna to produce steam, said to have health benefits, while a *gurushin* is a cold-water pool with a temperature below 50ºF (under 10ºC).

7 A **super *sento*** is a public bath facility with added features, such as having a variety of bath types with different themes, or things like massage chairs and general relaxation facilities. It's not the same thing as an *onsen* (a hot spring), since the water is artificially heated.

8 "Since it's, y'know, the next *hot*… Never mind…" Instead of *hot*, the original wordplay here was on the idiom "I can feel it [like a tingling sensation] on my skin," which means "to know from experience."

9 "Praying that Hayama Magic would make the call for Chiba…" Hayama Magic was part of a routine from the comedian Shougo Kawashima, in which he plays a street magician. Kawashima was also born and raised in Chiba.

10 "I'd even forge his signature…" In Japan, official seals are unique, custom-made stamps of your name legally registered to you and are used instead of signatures. In the original, Hachiman refers to stealing Hayama's—essentially, identity theft.

Chapter 7 … What **Hina Ebina** sees through the lens is…

1 "He must be a primitive… A Chiba primitive…" A *Chiba genjin* is local slang used by people who live in Chiba for the purpose of commuting to Tokyo (in fact the majority) to describe Chiba natives, living farther away from Tokyo.

2 "…he hasn't evolved at all since the Chibanian epoch." The

Chibanian epoch is real; it was formerly known as the Middle Pleistocene and was renamed in 2020 due to strata discovered in Chiba prefecture.

3 **"He's got to be from the Jomon period… Does he come from the Kasori Shell Mounds?"** The Jomon period is between approximately 10,500 and 300 BCE. The Kasori Shell Mounds is an archaeological site in Chiba.

4 **"Yuigahama chanted File Attach! …But it missed! Yuigahama is confused! It does sound confusingly like Fire Attack, though, I'll admit."** The original gag here is on the katakana in *fairu tenpu* (file attach) visually resembling the katakana in *parupunte*, a random effect spell in the *Dragon Quest* series, usually translated as Hocus Pocus.

5 ***"…there's more muntjac in Chiba lately—there's too many, and people are always going 'Oh! Deer!' and I wonder what I did wrong this time."*** He's specifically talking about the Reeves's muntjac, a species of small deer native to Southeast Asia. Some escaped from a zoo in Chiba in the 1960s and 1970s and have since become an invasive species. The word for muntjac in Japanese is *kyon*, which is also a character from *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*, and the original line here was "There's too many, and people are always saying, *Kyon-kun, Kyon-kun*" (which is how that character is referred to in *Haruhi*).

6 **"Hurr-hurr-hurr, let it happen, let it happen!"** *Yoi de wa nai ka!* is a stereotypical line in period dramas, often accompanied by the "obi spin," where a man yanks on a woman's obi, ripping it off to spin her like a top.

7 **"Is she Datsue-ba? A scene like something out of 'Rashomon' was unfolding right in front of me."** Datsue-ba is a mythological old hag who waits by the river of the dead and strips the living of their clothes. "Rashomon" is a short story by Akutagawa that ends with a man down on his luck brutally stealing the clothes off an old woman's back.

8 ***Don't Stop the Camera!*** is the Japanese title for the 2017 comedy zombie movie *One Cut of the Dead*.

9 **"Heh-heh-heh… And then you and Hayato…" With a terrifying smile—a slasher smile, if you will—Ebina chuckled at me."** This whole section is a series of *fu* puns, where the character for "rotten" (from *fujoshi*) replaces other characters, starting with Ebina describing herself as *fujuubun* (insufficient) to be photographed and chuckling *fu-fu-fu*, and then Hachiman describes her laughter as *fuon* (ominous).

10 **"Meanwhile, I was nothing but moved. With this much moving going on, I could generate enough power for a whole city! Though this is moving us away from the point!"** The original wordplay here is "But I was so full of emotion [*kangai*]—how many farms could I water [punning on *kangai*, irrigation]! Well, that's kind of the wrong emotion, though!" *Kangai-chigai* literally means "the wrong emotion," but it also sounds like *kangae-chigai*, meaning "misunderstanding."

11 **"…but being in a room with both her and Yuigahama, it was like, *Wo-wo-whoa-wo whoa-wo-wo*. I almost expected someone to fire off a *shinken* in there."** This is a reference to the manga *Bobobo-bo Bo-bobo*, and the *shinken*, translated as True Fist or Super Fist, is a technique used by the protagonist.

12 **"*Well, they do say a boy will grow so much in three days, you won't even recognize him the next time you see him…I'll drop dead screaming.*"** That saying is attributed to the famous Chinese general Lu Meng, who also appears in the classic novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in a particularly gruesome death scene.

Chapter 8 … While wishing to not go wrong again, at least…

1 **"'So is it just me who's been personally requested?' I asked…'That's my professional alias'…'That's a great name**

for the number one most in-demand boy in the establishment.'" "Personal request" (*shimei*) is the term used for selecting your chosen host/hostess at a host club or cabaret club. The word for "professional alias" here is also exclusively for such professions. These clubs also generally have their staff ranked, and their number one will be the most requested at the club.

2 ***Beauty Looking Back*** is a famous seventeenth-century woodblock print of a woman turning around to look behind her by artist Moronobu Hishikawa.

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Contents

1. Cover
2. Insert
3. Title Page
4. Copyright
5. Cast of Characters
6. Interlude
7. 1: Shizuka Hiratsuka feels keenly nostalgic about the past.
8. 2: There's something Iroha Isshiki wants to make sure of, no matter what.
9. Interlude
10. 3: Yui Yuigahama continues to stand back and watch, to the end.
11. Interlude
12. 4: Once again, Hachiman Hikigaya makes a speech.
13. 5: At some point unknown, the ending credits begin to roll.
14. Interlude
15. 6: Privately, Hayato Hayama feels regret.
16. Interlude
17. 7: What Hina Ebina sees through the lens is…
18. Interlude
19. 8: While wishing to not go wrong again, at least…
20. Interlude
21. Translation Notes
22. Yen Newsletter